

AN: You guys love canon things, right? Well, here's one that I'm very excited about! I've come to grow very fond of the Hermit of Hekima, and I've become very interested in exploring his history. So, naturally, I'm writing this spin-off now. This is going to be exciting! So, without further ado, I proudly present the first chapter of *The Hermit*!

The Hermit

Chapter One: The Birth

It started with an egg.

"It's a little... strange, don't you think?"

"Well, I think it's quite cute, myself."

Hekima and Afya exchanged uncertain looks with each other. For two golden eagles – often terrifying creatures who knew no fear – they seemed rather worried. *Very* worried, actually. In fact, they were so worried that they felt like flying away into space in order to escape their troubles.

But then most parents felt like that about having their first child.

"Hekima, it's huge," Afya said, trekking across the nest. He was the male, and actually the much smaller of the two. "It makes me look like a mouse – and I *eat* mice!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Hekima said, shooting him a disapproving glare. "Afya, you're taller than that egg, and you know it."

"Not by much," Afya retorted.

The egg in question was incredibly large for its size. Very abnormal. It was so tall that it almost went up to Afya's neck.

The male stared at it with wide eyes. "How on earth did you manage to lay this, Hekima?" he asked, turning around to look at his mate.

"I wouldn't know," Hekima said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Call it a miracle of nature. Perhaps the Great Wings of the Past have been kind to us."

"It's the Great *Kings* of the Past, Hekima," Afya said.

"I know what I said, Afya," Hekima retorted.

"And how on earth is that kindness?" Afya asked, gawping at the egg. "Do you have any idea how much this baby will need to eat?"

"This is a good hunting spot," Hekima replied. "I'm sure it won't be too hard to find dinner for our child."

"At least you're right on something," Afya said, throwing a wing around his mate's shoulder and pulling her tight. "We're on a prime piece of land here!"

The two golden eagles stood at the edge of their nest, which was located at the top of an enormous tree. It easily overshadowed all the others, where several other nests had been built.

"This is the best tree in the jungle," Afya told his mate enthusiastically, smiling at the sight. "Those other pigeons are gonna have to settle for lacklustre views, while we can see everything!"

"It is rather impressive," Hekima said. She glanced up at the thick grey clouds which blotted out the sky. Light rain splattered onto her beak. "Although the same can't be said for the weather..."

"It'll perk up," Afya assured her. "It's probably just the bad season. You can't beat that view, though. I mean, just look at that!"

He gestured with his free wing to something in the distance. "You can see the Pride Lands right there! Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, dear," Hekima said. "It's wonderful."

"I bet even those lions would be pretty amazed by our home," Afya said. "Why, our newborn son might even meet one someday!"

"What makes you think it'll be a boy?" Hekima questioned. "We might have a little daughter instead."

"I can feel it in my soul, Hekima," Afya said. "We're going to have a beautiful young son! And he will be the best golden eagle who ever lived! You'll see!"

"You'll have to wait for him to grow up first, Afya," Hekima said, walking back over to the egg.

"And he's going to grow up in the best area," Afya said. "I've checked the whole place out. Great neighbours, lovely school – he'll do just fine living here. With great parents like us, he'll have the perfect childhood."

"I can hardly wait." Hekima walked back over to the egg. She tapped it gently with a talon. "It won't be long before he hatches."

"He's probably fully grown already," Afya said, staring at the enormous egg. "That's why he's so big. The Great Kings of the Past have spared us having to raise him."

"I *want* to raise a child," Hekima said. "I've never had someone who I can cuddle in my wings before."

"Well—"

"Someone who *doesn't* always want to take it further," Hekima interrupted with a knowing stare. "I'm sure he'll be a brilliant son, no matter how big he is."

"I hope you're right," Afya said. "As long as he isn't some sort of horrible demon sent to destroy the whole jungle, we'll be fine."

"And we'll both be there for him," Hekima said, gazing into her mate's eyes. "Always."

The two nuzzled each other.

Crack!

The two golden eagles gasped in surprise. The sound was easily audible, even above the loud pattering of the rain. It was quite apparent to them what was happening.

The egg was hatching.

A thin crack had appeared right down the middle of the enormous egg. It wouldn't be long before their newborn child emerged from within, opening its eyes to an exciting new world.

"It's hatching," Hekima whispered, unable to hide the excited smile on her beak. She tensed up in anticipation, enthralled by the sight.

"It's wonderful," Afya breathed, almost looking as enthusiastic as she did.

More cracks began to form on the egg; it looked as though it could burst open at any moment.

"I wonder what he'll look like?" said Afya.

"I don't care," Hekima said. "Whatever he looks like, he'll always be beautiful to me."

Suddenly, the egg smashed open!

The beaks of the two golden eagles dropped open in shock at what they saw.

The chick that had hatched from the egg was already almost as tall of them. Most of his feathers had grown in, too. This was one heck of a miracle...

His huge orange eyes stared up in curiosity at his parents, who weren't much taller than him.

Regardless of this abnormality, Hekima was already smitten with her baby.

"He's just like I imagined," she said, beaming at the child.

The baby began to cry, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Hekima, doing the motherly thing, wrapped the child up in her wings. This was a hard task, given his huge size – but she managed it.

"Don't cry, little one," she said soothingly, stroking the top of his head. "Your mother is here for you."

The baby stared into his mother's eyes, as if studying her.

"Everything's going to be all right," she assured her child. "I'll always be here for you."

The baby stopped crying, and smiled.

"What are we going to name him?" Afya asked, staring admiringly at his newborn son. He placed a wing gently on Hekima's shoulder.

And Hekima, who already felt like she knew her baby inside out, came up with the answer.

"I'll call you... Maalum."

AN: I like his parents already. Very fun characters to write for. So, Maalum – who will become the Hermit of Hekima – has been born! How interesting! Sadly, he seems to be quite large for his age. Is this going to cause problems? I think you know the answer to that...

AN: After the wonderful birth of Maalum, we now finally get to see him as a child! Hooray!

The Hermit

Chapter Two: First Day

"Maalum! Get up!"

Hekima nudged her child, who was sleeping soundly by the side

of the nest.

Maalum was now a couple of months old. Hekima and Afya had kept him confined to the nest for now; they didn't want him getting hurt or mixed up with other predators. There was no telling what kind of dangers were out there in the jungle... even with them to protect him.

The young golden eagle's eyes flickered open. He shook himself awake, spreading his enormous wings and stretching them out wide. His feathers had a perfect blend of colour to them: white on his front side and a pure gold on the back. He looked beautiful.

Hekima's eyes widened at the sight. He would grow up to be quite an attractive bird. She knew that. Any female would throw themselves at his feet... Well, when he grew up, they would probably only be as tall as his feet. They were huge enough already!

"All right, Mom," Maalum mumbled, rubbing the side of his face with a wing. "I'm up."

"It's time for your first day of school, Maalum," Hekima told him, much to the child's dismay.

"School?" Maalum said. He groaned. "Oh, Mom, come on – I'm only a couple of months old."

"It's the same age every child goes to school, Maalum," Hekima told him. "I went to school when I was two months old, and so did your father. In fact, that's where we met."

"Yeah. Good for you," said Maalum, folding his wings. He didn't look overly enthusiastic about it. "But you're not three times taller than all the other kids."

"Maalum, what does it matter how tall you are?" Hekima asked. When she looked at her son, she saw nothing but perfection. Not a problem with him. "Your appearance is what makes you unique."

"No one else is going to see it that way," Maalum said, turning away from his mother and staring out at the jungle. Their nest overlooked all of the other trees; you could see everything for miles around. "I'll just look like a freak to them."

"I seriously doubt that," Hekima said. "I don't think anyone could possibly hate you."

"Not if they know what's good for them," said a muffled voice from behind.

Hekima and Maalum turned around to see Afya, who had just landed on the nest. He held a small mouse in his beak. He dropped it onto the ground. "Breakfast is served!"

Maalum dived straight for the mouse, scooping it up in his large beak and swallowing it whole.

"Mmm!" he exclaimed, enjoying the taste. "Got any more, Dad?"

Afya chuckled. "What did I say about this kid, Hekima?" he said. "I told you he would be a big eater."

"You're not wrong," Hekima agreed. She smiled at her son. "Maalum, you should try to conserve your food. It's hard for us to keep hunting for you all of the time. Plus we need to feed ourselves, too."

"Sorry," Maalum said sheepishly. "I was feeling a little peckish."

"He always says that," Afya retorted. "If only there was a land full of mice for us to feed on. Then we'd be set."

"You can dream about mice later, Afya," Hekima said. "I have to take Maalum to his first day of school."

"Was that today?" Afya asked, narrowing his eyes. "I thought it was next month."

"Yes – it's today, birdbrain," Hekima retorted with a smile.

"I must've lost track of time," Afya muttered. He looked at his

son. "Are you excited, Maalum?"

"Oh, yeah..." said Maalum sarcastically. "Sure."

"That's the spirit!" He patted Maalum on the back. "Enthusiasm! You see? I knew that he would grow up to become a tough, assertive, vicious predator – just like his father!"

"Afya, you're about as vicious as a slug," Hekima said. "The first time I saw you kill a mouse, you *apologised* to it."

"I was merely being respectful," Afya said. "What would the Great Kings of the Past think of me if I wasn't grateful for my food?"

"They would probably say nothing," Hekima said. "And it's the Great *Wings* of the Past."

"No – it's the Great *Kings*," Afya replied.

"Wings!"

"Kings!"

"Wings!"

"Kings!"

"Afya..."

"Hekima..."

"Are you two gonna fight all day?" Maalum asked. "I don't really mind; we can just leave school until tomorrow."

"School is a necessary part of life, Maalum," Afya explained.

"Why, you wouldn't even be here if I never went to school.

That's where I met your mother. Ah..." He sighed dreamily.

"Love at first sight."

"Love at first *bite*," Hekima remarked. "He kept on annoying me with his flirts, so I nipped him on his shoulder with my beak. He soon left me alone after that."

"That's not how I remember it," Afya said. "You were practically *begging* me for a date."

"You asked fifty-four times before I said yes," Hekima said. "Granted, that was when I realised how much you loved me, but you were still pretty annoying back then."

"And that's love for you, Maalum," Afya told his son. "You never know when it's going to rear its ugly head."

"I don't see what this has to do with me going to school," Maalum said. "It's not like I'm going to learn anything."

"You learn lots of things in school, son," said Afya. "Why, I even managed to get a D in hunting class – and now I bring home the biggest mice!"

"Your father was a dunce in school, Maalum," Hekima informed him. "I'm the one with the A in parenting."

"All right, Mrs Nerd Bird, you're better than me," Afya said. "I freely admit that."

"All animals are equal, Afya," Hekima said. "No matter how big or small."

"Tell that to the mice," scoffed Afya.

"We're not sadists, Afya," Hekima said. "We do what's necessary to survive. I don't know what kind of sick individual would take pleasure in killing a tiny mouse."

"Someone evil," Afya responded, "and that we most certainly are not."

"And I'm sure you're even purer than us, Maalum," Hekima said, staring admiringly at her son. "You could grow up to be something great. I can tell."

Maalum smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

He liked his mother a lot. She was always so encouraging. She seemed to want nothing but the best for him. And, to the young

eagle, that was a very good sign of love. He loved both of his parents. They were brilliant.

"I suppose I'd better take you to school, then," Hekima said, walking towards the edge of the nest. "Come on, Maalum. I'm sure you'll be all settled in by the end of the day."

Maalum slowly followed after his mother, dragging his feet along the ground. "Coming, Mom," he muttered.

"Good luck, son!" called Afya.

Hekima spread her wings and took to the skies, gliding through the air with ease. Maalum had been on a few flying lessons with his father already; this was only around the nest, however. He hadn't been any further than that yet. Still, he knew the basics.

Maalum spread his own wings – which were far more impressive-looking, it had to be said – and leapt from the nest. He flew through the air, feeling the light breeze ruffling his feathers. It had a rather pleasant effect on him. He felt free.

Still, he couldn't help but shake off the feeling of dread that plagued him. Once he started school, he was quite sure that things would only get worse.

And, sadly, he was right.

AN: Maalum seems pretty pleasant enough. Hekima and Afya are very enjoyable, too. I love the three of them so far! Very interesting characters to write for. Next time, we shall see how Maalum's first day of school goes. Oh, dear..

AN: I think you'll like this chapter, as it's a good treat for your hardcore *TLKA* fans. Well, the whole story is for hardcore fans, so there's no point in saying this, actually. Oh, just read it!

The Hermit

Chapter Three: Maarifa's School of Knowledge

Maalum and Hekima walked down a narrow path after landing; the school wasn't too far away now. Five more minutes and they would be there. Afya had said that it was the best school in the jungle, and she had faith in her mate – even if he could be a little daft at times – so she knew that her son wouldn't come across too much trouble.

But Maalum had other ideas.

"Mom?"

"Hmm?" said Hekima. She was staring straight ahead, so she failed to spot the worried look in her son's eyes.

"I'm scared."

The two golden eagles instantly stopped.

Hekima stared down at her son; he did indeed look rather frightened. She found this rather odd, to be honest. What kind of a golden eagle – especially one that was three times the size of everyone else – would be frightened of something as simple as school? It didn't really add up.

But she respected her son's feelings, and she would hear him out. It was her job as a parent to help him.

"You're scared?" Hekima narrowed her eyes at the young golden eagle. "Maalum, what on earth is there to be frightened about?"

"Well... look at me," Maalum said, spreading his enormous wings. He could easily touch the two trees that were on either side of him. "I'm huge."

"So?" said Hekima. "What's wrong with being huge?"

"All the other kids are gonna make fun of me," he complained. "I know it."

"Maalum, they should be frightened of you," Hekima retorted. "Golden eagles like us are among the most feared of predators. Perhaps not as much as lions – but we are feared, nonetheless."

"Will there be lions at school?" Maalum asked, raising an interesting point.

"Um... yes," Hekima answered, suddenly feeling rather sheepish.

"Then they're tougher than me," Maalum said. "I wouldn't be surprised if I came home with all my feathers plucked."

"Maalum, lions may be more feared than us, but you will always have the advantage of size," Hekima explained. "If anyone tries to give you any bother, then give them a good hard clonk on the head. You could crush a lion's leg with your pinky toe."

"But I don't want to hurt anyone," Maalum said, shaking his head. "I don't see the point."

Hekima chuckled. "Maalum, violence is necessary for our species – especially if you're going to hunt your own food someday," she said. "It's a way of life."

"It doesn't sound so good to me," Maalum said, folding his wings.

"You will learn soon enough," Hekima told him. "Now, come on. You don't want to be late."

The two golden eagles carried on walking, with Maalum feeling even worse than he did before.

If I don't want to hurt anyone, he thought, then just what am I supposed to do?

Maalum dragged his feet along the ground as they continued on their journey, staring down at the ground. He was completely immersed in his thoughts. The feeling of uncertainty swaying around inside of him was utterly dreadful.

He didn't know what awaited him at school – but he was convinced that it wouldn't be something good.

Five minutes later, Maalum and Hekima arrived at the end of

the path, which opened out to reveal a large clearing. The giant golden eagle could see a bunch of animals gathered around the area, talking and playing with each other.

"This is it," Hekima announced, smiling at her son.

A female hornbill suddenly appeared from out of nowhere, greeting them with a friendly smile.

"Hi!" she said cheerily. "Welcome to the Maarifa School of Knowledge! I'm Maarifa, in case you didn't know."

"Hello," Hekima said, smiling back at the hornbill. "I'm here to enrol my son."

Maarifa's eyes widened as she stared up at the enormous Maalum. "Well," she chuckled, "you're certainly a big one, aren't you?"

"He had an... early growth spurt," Hekima explained, glancing at Maalum, who was already turning red with embarrassment.

"I can see that," said Maarifa. "What's his name?"

"Maalum," Hekima said.

"Well, I'm sure we'll be able to fit you in, Maalum," Maarifa told him. "There's room for everyone at this school!"

"How many kids do you have?" Hekima asked.

"About nine in all," Maarifa said. "I'm sure Maalum will fit right in."

"I hope so," Hekima said. "He was a little nervous coming here."

Maalum felt even more embarrassed now. In fact, he would have preferred it if he could just disappear for ever. His mother wasn't helping much. They were talking about him like he wasn't even there.

"No reason to be nervous," Maarifa said, gazing up at Maalum.

She looked rather astounded that someone of his age would be so timid. "We're all friendly here, Maalum. And you'll learn lots of things—"

She stopped speaking as a much smaller hornbill – obviously a child – started tugging at her feathers. "Mommy?"

"Excuse me one moment," Maarifa said, before turning to her child. "What is it, Pori?"

"Who's the giant golden eagle?" Pori asked curiously, staring up in awe at Maalum. "I could see him from a mile away."

"Pori, don't be silly," Maarifa said admonishingly. "You were only a few feet away from where I am right now."

"Sorry, Mommy," she said. "But who is he? He's enormous!"

"This is Maalum," Maarifa said, pointing at him with a wing. "He's going to be joining us at the school."

"But he's, like, twenty times as big as everyone else!" Pori cried. "He's too old to join us!"

"He had an early growth spurt," Maarifa explained. "That means he grows a lot faster than the rest of us."

"He's taller than you," Pori pointed out. "That's pretty big."

"I know," Maarifa said, "but we have to be nice to him, since he's nervous and doesn't know any of us. Okay?"

Pori stared at Maalum for a few moments, as if studying him, and then smiled. "Okay."

"Good," Maarifa said. "Now, run along and play."

"Bye, Giant Birdie!" Pori called, before running off to join the other animals.

Maarifa shrugged at Hekima. "That's my daughter, Pori," she said. "She's a little bit wild – but she's nice enough. Maybe she and Maalum can become friends."

"I hope so," Hekima said. "I want him to fit in with the rest of the kids. It'd be a shame if he spent his whole life living like an outcast."

"I'm standing right here, you know," Maalum snapped. "I can speak for myself."

"Oh, sorry, Maalum," Hekima said. "I guess I'll just leave you with Maarifa, then. I'll pick you up in a few hours."

Maalum sighed. He wasn't sure about this at all. "Mom—"

"Maalum, you'll be fine," Hekima assured her. "Just... be yourself." She gave him a peck on the cheek. "I love you."

Pori had already alerted the rest of the class to Maalum's presence, so they chuckled at this show of affection.

Maalum sighed deeply. "Love you, too," he mumbled.

"Come on, Maalum," Maarifa said, walking forwards. "I'll introduce you to the rest of the class."

Great, he thought. This is gonna suck.

AN: Pori! Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow! Oh, my God! Another *TLKA* character! My mind is spinning with—

Oops. Sorry. I turned into one of my own fangirls for a second there. Still, I think it's only natural to include other *TLKA* characters in this story. Will anyone else pop up? We shall see when Maalum is introduced to the class! Things aren't going well for him... Can they get any better?

AN: Time for Maalum to meet the rest of his class! If you liked the previous chapter, then you'll love this next one! There are even more surprises in store!

The Hermit

Chapter Four: Meeting the Class

Maarifa had assembled the class so they were sitting in a circle, with Maalum sitting to the hornbill's left. He felt completely out of place with the other cubs and birds; he was exceedingly taller than all of them – including the teacher herself – and this had drawn the attention of the kids.

They were all staring at him, both amazed and freaked out by the sight. To them, Maalum looked like a monster. Something that ought not to belong in a class. He didn't even look like a child. He looked older than Maarifa. It was that bad.

"Now, today, kids, we have a new child joining the class," Maarifa announced with a smile. The other kids just stared at her in confusion. "This is Maalum."

She stared up at the giant golden eagle. It was true that she too was rather disturbed by the sight; she just couldn't understand it. How was he so tall?

"Now, he's a little nervous, so let's all be as nice as we possibly can," Maarifa said. "We want him to fit right in with us!"

"But he's enormous," said a cub. "He doesn't belong here."

The other kids giggled at this.

Maalum seemed much more interested in his feet than the rest of the class. He felt very embarrassed... This was so awkward. He didn't even want to look at them. He just wanted his mother to come back and take him away from this awful place. He hated it.

"Don't be rude, Maana," Maarifa said sternly. "You should learn to treat other animals with more respect."

The cub called Maana scoffed. "Sure," he said. "When I'm older, everyone's gonna be doing what I say. I'll control them all!"

"That's enough, Maana," Maarifa snapped. "Now, let's all introduce ourselves to Maalum."

"Ooh – I'll go first!" said the female hornbill from earlier. She

was sitting right next to her mother. Maalum remembered that her name was Pori. "I'm Pori!"

Maarifa chuckled. "My daughter always likes to go first," she explained to Maalum. "She's very eager."

"I'll go next, then," said a cub to Maalum's right, raising her paw. "I'm Kulevya."

A much smaller golden eagle was sat next to Kulevya. She was female. "I'm Tajiri," she said, smiling warmly at Maalum. "Hi!"

Maalum stared into her eyes, a smile slowly forming on his beak.

She's pretty, he thought, although he soon snapped himself out of it. *Uh... I mean, yeah. She looks okay, I guess.*

The rest of the class told their names, but Maalum wasn't really interested. After hearing Tajiri speak, he became lost in his own thoughts. The experience has only managed to make him feel even more awkward than before; they all hated him. He could sense it.

Literally.

He didn't know why, but Maalum had this... feeling. Deep down in the pit of his stomach. It was as if he could feel the emotions that everyone else was feeling. They were scared of him. They thought he was abnormal. A freak.

Except for Tajiri. He could feel a warm aura emanating from her. She didn't hate him; she was more intrigued rather than scared. That was nice, at least. Maybe he could make friends with her...

"And that's everyone!" Maarifa exclaimed. "Now that you know us all, I'm sure you'll feel right at home, Maalum."

"It's not everyone, Maarifa," Kulevya said. "Kipanya's not here."

"Oh. Yes..." Maarifa rolled her eyes. "Well, Kipanya likes to run

away now and again. He's never been much of a punctual student."

"Is he... bad?" Maalum asked, daring to speak.

"Kipanya is just a bit distant from the rest of us," Maarifa explained. "I'm sure he'll come back sooner or later. You can talk to him then."

I don't think I will, Maalum thought to himself. He would have preferred it if he didn't have to talk to anyone.

"I guess we'll start with our first lesson, then," Maarifa said, rising to her feet. "Math!"

The entire class groaned.

After a droll hour of learning how to count from one to ten – which Maalum could already do, thanks to his mother being a 'nerd bird', as Afya called her – Maarifa had allowed the class to have a little break. Most of the other kids had gone off in their own little groups, leaving Maalum stranded on his own in the corner of the clearing.

He knew that none of them wanted to go near him. They thought he was a monster. Someone his size just didn't belong in a school.

I hate it here, Maalum thought, resting against the trunk of a tall tree. *I just want to go home...*

The giant golden eagle's eyes wandered, as he noticed a mouse scuttling across the ground.

For a scant moment, he considered picking the thing up and eating it whole. It wouldn't be a bad lunch – and he liked the taste of mice a lot.

But someone else beat him to it.

Smack!

A paw smashed down on the mouse's body, crushing it.

Maalum watched as a strange-looking lion cub picked up the small creature, popping it into his mouth and swallowing it whole. He had black fur, blue eyes, and a blonde tuft of fur on top of his head.

"Ha-ha-ha! *I like it!*"

"That wasn't very nice," Maalum said, staring down at the cub. "You shouldn't torture animals like that before you eat them."

"It's fun," said the cub, only for him to realise moments later that he was speaking with a giant golden eagle. "Hey – how come you're so big?"

"My mother says it's an early growth spurt," Maalum explained sheepishly, shuffling his feet on the ground.

"Weird," said the cub. Maalum didn't feel like this cub was afraid of him, or thought that he was a freak. He just seemed intrigued. "So... what's your name, sausage?"

"Maalum," he replied. "And what do you mean, 'sausage'?"

"It's my own word," the cub said. "I invented it, so that means I can use it whenever I like."

"What's *your* name, then?" asked Maalum.

"I'm Kipanya," he said, placing a paw against his chest.

Kipanya? A feeling of dread washed over Maalum. *He must be the one who keeps running away! I hope he's not going to hurt me...*

Maalum couldn't detect a bad aura surrounding Kipanya, so he didn't think that the cub would be a threat to him – for now.

"Kipanya," Maalum repeated. "That's a... nice name."

Kipanya shrugged. "I don't like it that much," he said. "I'd prefer a much cooler name – like the Eviscerator or the

Strangulator!"

"How about the Interceptor?" suggested Maalum with a smile.

"Don't be stupid, ya sausage," Kipanya said. "That doesn't sound threatening at all."

"Sorry," Maalum said, his head hanging low.

"Don't sweat it," said the cub, smiling at Maalum. "You seem like a pretty cool guy, actually. Wait until everyone hears that I know a giant golden eagle! *I like it!*"

Maalum smiled back at Kipanya.

Perhaps he'd found a friend after all.

AN: I know you're all smiling right now. I'll just wait for your reactions in the reviews...

AN: Well, I'm back again for more of this interesting story! So, Maalum and Kipanya – who will one day become the Interceptor – have become friends. And now trouble will ensue. Yay!

The Hermit

Chapter Five: Two Freaky Friends

"So, uh... what do you like to do for fun, Maalum?" Kipanya asked, sitting down opposite the golden eagle. "Squash animals with your talons? Gobble them up in your beak? Slit their throats and watch as they bleed to death? Ha-ha! *I like it!*"

Maalum could detect a rather psychotic aura emanating from Kipanya. He didn't find the cub threatening in any way; however, he seemed to have a penchant for having rather murderous thoughts. It was... unnerving, to say the least.

Still, he could deal with that. He needed a friend – and fast. The other kids would start picking on him any second now... He could feel it.

"I'm not really into fighting," Maalum told him. "I don't see any point in it."

"Are you kidding me?" Kipanya exclaimed. He pointed at Maalum with both forepaws. "But you're huge, kid! I mean, one look at you and animals will run for cover! Of course, if you attacked me, I would fight you to the death. I'm probably the bravest animal around."

"The bravest animal around?" said Maalum. His eyes lit up with curiosity. "*Really?*"

"Oh, yeah," said Kipanya confidently. "Sure. Ever since I was kicked out of my pride, I've been wandering the jungle ever since."

"Wait," Maalum said, raising a wing. "You were kicked out of your pride?" He couldn't imagine a respectable pride of lions doing such a thing. His father had often spoken of lions as being very proud creatures. Why would they kick one of their own out of their pride?

"Yeah, ya sausage," Kipanya said. "I don't like to talk about it, though – so don't ask!"

"Okay," Maalum said. "I won't. I respect your privacy."

"The point is that we're both outcasts," Kipanya said. "You and me. That's why we should be friends."

"That makes sense, I guess," said Maalum, staring down at the ground. He certainly felt like an outcast. "I know that all the other kids hate me..."

"Well, they ain't exactly fond of me, either," Kipanya said. "They think I'm weird 'cause I like to run away and catch mice all of the time. What's wrong with that? Can't a lion enjoy his meal without being persecuted for it?"

"You really like chasing mice," Maalum noticed. "Don't you?"

"They taste nice," Kipanya replied. "And I just *love* the thrill of

the chase! Running as fast as you can, trying to catch your prey. *I like it!*"

"I try not to torture them," Maalum said. "I mean, I like eating mice – but that's about it. I'm not really into chasing them down and stuff."

"But you're an eagle," Kipanya said. "One day, you'll *have* to hunt them down. And you do it in such an awesome way, too. All that screeching and stuff. *Love* the screeching, by the way. I'd love to be able to do that."

"I'm not really that violent," Maalum said.

Kipanya stared at him in shock. "Jeez... I'm gonna have to try and toughen you up. A silly sausage like you isn't going to get anywhere without a hunger for blood! It's all a part of nature!"

"Then I don't like nature," Maalum declared, folding his enormous wings. "It's stupid."

Kipanya rolled his eyes, turning away from the giant golden eagle. He then frowned. "Try telling them that."

Maalum looked upwards to see one of the cubs from earlier – he remembered he was called Maana – approaching him. He had a frown on his face; he didn't look happy at all. In fact, he seemed like a threat... Maalum could feel it in his guts.

"Well, well, well," said Maana, affecting a grin. "If it isn't the little mouse and his freaky giant bird. You two should get married."

"Shut up, Maana," Kipanya snapped. "Why don't you go and die in a hole?"

"You come up with the most pathetic insults," Maana retorted. "You two are practically made for each other. You're both just ugly freaks."

Maalum looked away from the cub, stung by his hurtful words. He felt more upset than angry.

"Why don't you say that again?" Kipanya threatened, taking a step towards Maana. "'Cause when you mess with him, you mess with me."

"I don't care," said Maana. "I can take you both."

"My pal Maalum here could squash you flat," Kipanya said, looking over his shoulder at the giant golden eagle. "Come on, Maalum. Show him who's boss!"

"I don't want to fight anyone," Maalum murmured, curling up slightly. "I think I'll just, um... stay here, if it's all the same with you."

"Fine," Kipanya said.

"What a coward!" Maana laughed. "If I had him for a friend, then I'd just be embarrassed. He's worthless to his species!"

"Shut up!" Kipanya growled, spitting in Maana's eye.

"*You little freak!*" Maana pounced at Kipanya.

Maalum watched as the two rolled across the ground, clawing and biting at each other. Kipanya seemed to be easily getting the upper hand, though; he seemed pretty wild to Maalum.

"Hey! Hey!"

Maarifa came marching over to the two cubs, landing right between them and breaking up the fight.

"Break it off, you two," Maarifa said. "Kipanya, are you fighting *again*?"

"He started it!" Kipanya accused, pointing at Maana with a claw. "He was bullying Maalum!"

Maarifa turned to Maalum, who had practically curled up into a ball by now. He looked rather scared, which he was. Maana's words had upset him greatly... He already thought of himself as a freak – and he had only made it worse.

"Maalum, is this true?" Maarifa asked. "Was Maana bullying you?"

Maalum opened his beak to talk. "Well—"

He then caught Maana shooting him a threatening glare. Fear instantly gripped him.

"Um... no," Maalum lied. "Not really."

Kipanya's mouth dropped open in shock. "*What?*"

"I knew it!" Maarifa exclaimed. She stared angrily at Kipanya.

"Kipanya, you need to stop bothering the other kids! Learn how to control yourself!"

"But I... I..." He groaned in frustration. "Darn it."

"And watch your language, young man!" Maarifa led Maana away from the area. "Come on, Maana. You don't want to hang around with animals like him."

Maana stuck his tongue out at Kipanya and Maalum as he walked away.

Kipanya stared at Kipanya in disbelief. "Why didn't you say anything?" he asked. "He was calling you names!"

"I was... I was afraid," Maalum said. "I don't want him to hurt me... He hurt you."

Kipanya glanced at a nasty-looking graze on his shoulder. "Aw, it's nothing," he said, shrugging it off. "I've been in worse fights."

"I suppose you have," Maalum said, remembering how Kipanya had claimed himself to be the bravest animal around. "You're better than me."

"Nah," Kipanya said. He smiled at his friend. "You just need a bit of work. And maybe you could show me a few tricks, too."

Maalum smiled back. "I suppose I could."

AN: Gah! I hate Maana already! He was a little monster back then, too! At least the friendship between Maalum and Kipanya is growing... That's pretty cool, eh?

AN: Maalum's had a rough first day of school. It'll be a relief for him to get back home... if he does. Ha-ha-ha!

The Hermit

Chapter Six: Home Again

By the end of the school day, Maalum was relieved to finally be going home. The lessons had droned on for what seemed like hours, boring him out of his mind. Add that to the fact that Maana had kept giving him dirty glares – probably a sign that he was going to bother him again at some point – and it made for a rather unpleasant day.

The only good thing that seemed to come out of it was Kipanya. At least he'd found a friend. A strange, rowdy – and potentially psychotic – friend, but it was still someone who he could get along with. For now. He didn't want to get on Kipanya's bad side. That was for certain. He seemed to have quite the fiery temper...

"See you tomorrow, kids!" Maarifa was waving the other animals off as their parents came to collect them at the edge of the clearing.

Maalum still wasn't quite sure about Maarifa; originally, his deeper feelings had told him that she felt uneasy about his abnormality. However, that worry seemed to have lessened the more time that Maalum spent in school that day... Perhaps she would grow fond of him. He didn't know yet.

If first days were the hardest, then he was terrified of the second day.

"This has been one of my better days, kid," Kipanya told Maalum as they walked towards the edge of the clearing. "It's

not every day that I get to make friends."

"Have you had many friends before?" Maalum inquired.

"Uh... no," Kipanya said. "I'm more of a 'lone lion' type. But you're pretty cool. I've never seen someone so disturbingly weird before."

"Thanks," Maalum said, taking it as a compliment.

"No problem," Kipanya said. "You're a great guy, Maalum. I think that we could become quite a team. Hunters in crime."

"Well, I'm not much of a hunter..." Maalum mumbled, knowing that he held no violent tendencies whatsoever.

"Aw, that doesn't matter," Kipanya said with a wave of his paw. "I can teach you all the tricks that I've learnt since being born. Life in the wild is tough. You've gotta be prepared."

"Be prepared?" said Maalum. "Is that your motto?"

"Motto?" Kipanya laughed. "Nah – that's a stupid motto to have. My motto is this: 'Find the mouse, bite it, and don't let go.' Just rolls off your tongue, doesn't it?"

"Well—"

"Thanks," Kipanya interrupted, as they arrived at the edge of the clearing.

Maalum looked around, but he couldn't see his mother yet. She was running late. He couldn't think why. Maybe because she was arguing with Afya over another event in the past... That was the likely possibility.

Great, Maalum thought, a frown forming on his beak. Now she's late, too. Will I ever get out of this place?

"I guess you're, uh, waiting here, huh?" Kipanya asked, staring up at him.

Maalum nodded, resting against a tree. "Yeah," he replied. "My

mom will be here in a minute."

"Oh," Kipanya said. "Right. I'd better be going, then." He turned to leave.

"Hey, wait – what about *your* parents?" asked Maalum.

Kipanya turned around to face the giant golden eagle. "I don't have any parents," he said. "I told you: 'lone lion'." He gave him a little salute with a paw. "See ya round, sausage."

The cub bounded off, leaving Maalum on his own.

"Bye," he whispered, hoping that he would see Kipanya again tomorrow. If not, then Maana's bullying could become even worse... At least that lion cub provided some protection. Maalum wasn't sure that he could defend himself.

Maalum glanced around the clearing. Everyone had disappeared by now – even Maarifa – leaving the giant golden eagle completely stranded.

He wondered about his mother; she should have been here by now. He hoped that something horrible hadn't happened to her – like being murdered by a lion. They were powerful creatures; birds had nothing on them. Maybe both of his parents had been killed, and he would live alone for the rest of his life. Just like Kipanya. A 'lone bird', so to speak.

Maalum stood up straight, having been leaning against a tree for the past five minutes, and decided to start walking. It was better to keep moving rather than being exposed out in the open. Anything could happen. Despite his size, there could still be bigger predators out there...

The giant golden eagle stopped when he was halfway down the jungle path, realising that he didn't even know the way home. His mother was always there to guide him in the right direction. If he tried to get back to the nest on his own, then he would get completely lost, only worsening the situation.

Suddenly, Maalum heard a noise. A quiet noise, like something sneaking up on him from behind. Something that wanted to hurt him...

Slowly, Maalum turned around—

—and was confronted with his mother.

"Mom?" said Maalum.

"Maalum?" Hekima took a step towards her son. "What are you doing here? You should have waited at the clearing for me."

"You were late," Maalum said quietly, staring down at his feet.

"I'm sorry, Maalum," Hekima said. "Your father insisted that I help him to hunt some more mice for dinner, since you're a growing bird now. It won't happen again."

"Okay," said Maalum.

Hekima stared into her son's eyes. She smiled. "How was your first day?"

Maalum opened his beak to say something... only to burst into tears moments later. He threw his massive wings around his mother, hugging her tightly, almost enveloping her in a blanket of feathers.

"Maalum, what's wrong?" Hekima asked, hugging him back.

"That was the worst first day ever," he said through sobs, overjoyed to see her again. Having bottled up his emotions for most of the day, it was a relief to finally get them all out. He'd never felt so dreadful before in his life...

"It's okay, Maalum," Hekima soothed, gently stroking his back with a wing. "I should have known that it wouldn't go as well as I hoped."

"Yeah... well, it didn't," Maalum said, tears dribbling down his cheeks. "I hated it."

"I'm sorry, dear," Hekima said. She extricated herself from the hug. "Hey – why don't we go home first, and we can talk about it then, okay?"

Maalum used his gargantuan wing to wipe away some tears from his eyes, nodding.

"Okay," he replied.

"They hate me," Maalum said, sitting on the edge of the nest, observing the enormity of the jungle below.

"Oh, they don't hate you," Hekima said, sat beside him. "They just have to... adjust, that's all. It's not every day you get to see a giant golden eagle."

"They think I'm a freak," Maalum told her. "One of them even tried to hurt me!"

"Hurt you?" Hekima's expression turned cold. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter," Maalum said. "All you need to know is that no one likes me there. I'm never going to get along with them. Not even the teacher."

"How do you know they hate you?" Hekima asked.

"Because I can feel it," Maalum admitted. He hadn't ever told his parents that he could sense the feelings of others before.

"What do you mean?" said Hekima.

"I can feel that they hate me," Maalum said. "It's like I can sense it."

"Well... it looks like you have some insight," Hekima said.

"Metaphorically speaking, of course; I doubt that anyone can actually feel and know what another animal is thinking."

"Yeah," Maalum muttered. "How ridiculous..."

"It'll get better, Maalum," Hekima assured him. "I promise you. Everyone finds it hard to fit in... You just need to—"

"I've got fish!"

Maalum turned his head to see Afya landing on the edge of the nest, holding a few fish in his mouth.

"Afya, where on earth did you get fish from?" Hekima asked, thrown by this sudden arrival.

"From the best place of all," he said. "The Pride Lands."

Hekima gasped. "You did *not* sneak into the Pride Lands."

"I did," Afya said, sounding rather proud of himself. "And now I've got the best-tasting fish in the world. Your father has treated you, Maalum. How was school, by the way?"

"Uh, can I have the fish first?" Maalum asked, feeling like having something to eat. "I'll tell you later..."

AN: Well, Maalum's quite upset. At least Afya had procured – ahem, *stolen* – some fish from the Pride Lands for dinner. That rascal! I wonder if the next day for Maalum will bring any good news... It's doubtful.

AN: Maalum's had it rough this past day. At least he's home now, though. No more annoying cubs trying to hurt him – for now, at least. However, let's see if his parents are happy about his feelings towards school...

Chapter Seven: A Peaceful Evening

"Scared?" Afya laughed as he swallowed a mouthful of fish.

"Oh, Maalum, you must be pulling my wing. You can't be scared of a little learning. In fact, it's not just unfrightening; it's *fun*. It's all about— Mmm and... mmm... and... oh..."

"It sounds like our honeymoon in here," Hekima commented, watching as her mate savoured his fish. "Enjoying your dinner, dear?"

"It's delicious!" Afya replied, his mouth full. "In fact, I've

completely forgotten what we were talking about. Nothing is going to spoil our glorious family dinner that was specially prepared by chefs from the Pride Lands."

"Specially *stolen*, you mean," Hekima retorted, shooting him a disapproving glance.

"That doesn't matter," Afya said, gulping down more fish. "I feel very, very peaceful. There's nothing that anyone can say that will take me out of this fantastic mood—"

"I hate school," Maalum interrupted, curled up by the side of the nest.

Afya stared at his son, his eyes wide. "*What?*"

"I said I hate school," he repeated.

"Well, that's just dampened my mood," Afya said, a frown forming on his beak. "Maalum, don't be so absurd. The school days are the best days of your life."

"Even when you're rejected by everyone there and thought of as a freak?" Maalum replied.

Afya thought for a moment. "When I was in school, I was rejected by everyone and thought of as a freak."

"Really?"

"No," Afya said. "But if I were you, then I'm sure that I would have been."

"Wow," Maalum said, not enlightened in the slightest. "Thanks, Dad. You're a real help."

Afya chuckled. "No problem, son," he said. "Your dad still knows a trick or two. Ask me anything; my assistance is the best in the jungle."

"This is why you flunked every single one of your classes," Hekima said, folding her wings.

"I did *not* flunk every one of my classes," Afya responded, looking offended. "I passed hunting class – and when you're an eagle, that's all that matters."

"Don't listen to your father, Maalum," Hekima advised. "When it comes to intelligent thought, I'm the one to ask. Unlike him, I consider myself a very esteemed and highly intellectual creature."

"She doesn't even speak properly," Afya said. "We don't need to use fancy words like 'very', Hekima."

Hekima rolled her eyes. "Why did I even marry you?"

"Because you're madly in love with me?"

"Well, yes, but that's beside the point."

"I think I'll be excused," Maalum announced, rising to his feet. He'd had quite enough of his parents' mindless blabbering; they weren't helping at all. He felt like having some time to himself...

"What?" Afya narrowed his eyes. "But there's plenty of fish to go around, son. You're a growing bird. You have to eat. Stuff it down your gullet."

"I'm not very hungry," Maalum mumbled. "I'll see you guys later. I'm going for a walk."

"Don't stray too far," Hekima told him. "The jungle is a dangerous place, Maalum. There are plenty of nasty things out there that'll try to kill you – even if you are enormous compared to the rest of the world."

"I'll be okay," Maalum said, perching himself on the edge of the nest. "Bye." He spread his wings and glided away from the nest.

Hekima shook her head as she watched her son fly away. "Something is trouble that boy, Afya. He's finding it harder to fit in than most animals."

"I'm sure things will resolve themselves for him," Afya said,

finishing off the last of the fish. "They did for me. I've got a beautiful wife and a wonderful son. You can't go wrong with that."

"I suppose not," said Hekima. "I do worry about him, though..."

"Would some 'alone time' together relax you for a while?" Afya asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Hekima sighed. "Oh, you know it will."

Maalum landed silently on the ground. He'd made sure that he was on familiar territory; he wanted to be able to get back to the nest without getting lost again. He didn't want a repeat of what happened at school... As if he wasn't stressed out enough already.

The giant golden eagle sighed, sitting down on a medium-sized rock. He felt it sink into the ground under his weight. He was very heavy as well as very big...

"I don't believe this," he said to himself, staring at a tree opposite him. "Why does everyone hate me? Even my parents don't care..."

"Maalum?"

Maalum turned his head to the side, rather unnerved by the fact that someone had referred to him by name. He didn't even recognise the voice; it was female. Maybe it was one of the dangers that his mother had warned him about before he left... Knowing his luck, that was the most likely outcome.

The great golden eagle's eyes widened at who he saw.

It was a female golden eagle, although she was far shorter than him. It took Maalum a few moments, but he finally realised that he knew who this creature was.

It's the girl from school, he thought, leaning forward. She was a very beautiful bird; Maalum couldn't deny that. Even though

she was smaller, she was far prettier than he was.

"Um... hello," Maalum said timidly, rising awkwardly to his enormous feet. "You're, um, that... uh—"

She laughed. Maalum liked her laugh; it made him smile.

"I'm Tajiri," she said, taking a step towards him. "From class, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," Maalum said, chuckling nervously. He felt very tense to be around Tajiri; not because she was hostile, but rather because he thought that she was far superior to him, and he didn't want her to find him repulsive in any way. Not like Maana or any of the other kids in school, who obviously hated him.

Tajiri, however... He couldn't detect any nasty feelings stirring inside of her. In fact, she seemed rather flawless. Perfect, even.

"Sorry," Maalum said, leaning against a tree. "My memory isn't always the best. I haven't had the greatest day, either."

"Yeah," Tajiri said. "I heard about that. Maana's a bit of a pest. You get used to it." She looked him over. "I don't think anyone would get used to someone like *you*, though..."

"You don't need to tell me," Maalum replied, raising a wing. "I'm a freak. I know."

"I don't think you're a freak," Tajiri said, staring up at him. "In fact, you look pretty amazing, Maalum. I thought so ever since I first saw you today."

"Wow..." Maalum could feel himself blushing behind his feathers. "You... you really think that?"

"Yeah," said Tajiri, gazing at him. "You're a special animal, Maalum. You could be the best golden eagle around. If I were you, I'd ignore animals like Maana; they're the type of guys who go on to dig holes for the rest of their lives. Slave labour."

"You're pretty smart," Maalum said, impressed by the way she spoke. "A lot more intelligent than the other kids."

"My mom and dad used to be teachers themselves," Tajiri told him. "They taught me a lot of stuff before I was even ready to go to school. They said it would give me a head start."

"Well, my mom is pretty smart, too," Maalum said. He then raised his eyebrows. "My dad – not so much. In fact, he steals fish."

Tajiri chuckled. "He steals fish?"

"Yeah – but I don't," Maalum said quickly, feeling flustered again. "I mean, I'd hunt my fish on my own territory. I'm not that kind of bird."

Tajiri giggled. "You're funny, Maalum," she said. "You keep on impressing me."

"I do?" Maalum's smile widened. "Well, that's... that's good. I want to impress you. I mean in a friendly way, of course. Not like I'm looking for anything more than that... or something."

He mentally slapped himself. *Can't you cool it?* he thought. *Seriously, you're squawking like a stupid vulture. Be smooth!*

"Something more than that?" Tajiri raised an eyebrow, smiling at him. "And what would you mean by that, Maalum?"

"Um... I... uh..." Maalum chuckled, now more nervous than ever. "Sorry – I've forgotten how to talk."

"It's okay," Tajiri assured him. "You seem pretty honest about yourself, Maalum. I like that."

"Seriously?" asked Maalum.

"Yep," Tajiri said. "It's better than lying, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Maalum said, looking aside. "So, uh... what are you doing out here?"

"I like to go for walks in the evening," she explained. "My parents think I'm smart enough to be out by myself."

"I just wanted some time to myself," Maalum admitted. "My parents told me not to stray too far from the nest, though; I guess they think I'm gonna be eaten by a snake or something."

"I doubt that anyone would try to eat you," Tajiri said. "I mean, usually, females are bigger than male eagles. You're about three times my size, though. I'd need to climb your feathers just to kiss you on the beak."

"Why would you kiss me on the beak?" Maalum asked through narrowed eyes.

Tajiri shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Anyway... I'd better be going. It's nearly night. And, unlike you, some predators might try to catch me out if I'm not too careful."

"Oh," Maalum said, looking somewhat disappointed. He was quite enjoying talking to Tajiri. She seemed to understand him – and not in a psychotic, almost insane way like Kipanya did. "Okay, then."

"It was really good talking to you, though," Tajiri said, staring into his orangey eyes. "You're a great guy, Maalum."

"Yeah, it was pretty girl— I mean, pretty good talking to you," Maalum said, beaming at her.

Tajiri gave him one more of her wonderful laughs. "See you in class, Maalum," she said, before disappearing down a narrow path that winded through the trees.

"I will," Maalum said, waving goodbye. "Bye!"

The giant golden eagle sighed, feeling much happier now.

She's the greatest creature I've ever met in my life, he thought, amazed. Looks like size doesn't really matter after all.

AN: Well, I quite enjoyed this chapter. The interactions between

Hekima and Afya – as usual – were a lot of fun! Such great characters. And I found the conversation with Maalum and Tajiri to be very peaceful. You can tell that the giant golden eagle has feelings for her... Will it work out? Well, what do you think?

AN: *The Hermit* is back – and this is the longest chapter yet, which I'm sure all you fangirls will be pleased to hear! So, sit back and relax, as we see Maalum's school days continue.

The Hermit

Chapter Eight: The Next Day

Maalum awoke the next morning feeling much happier than he did before. Knowing that Kipanya and Tajiri at least liked him was more than enough to lift his spirits. If Maana tried to pester him again – which was likely – then he knew that he could count on one of them to back him up. Especially Kipanya. He was tough; he didn't take no for an answer. He would knock out Maana in ten seconds flat!

Maybe I'll just walk to school by myself today, he thought, striding over to the edge of the nest. He felt quite assured of himself. In fact, he would go so far as to say that he felt confident. *Surely nothing bad can happen...*

"Maalum, what are you doing?" inquired a voice.

Maalum turned around to face his mother. "Oh. Hi, Mom," he said, giving her a weak wave. "I was just, uh—"

"Sneaking off so you could avoid going to school today?"

Hekima interrupted, shooting him a disapproving stare.

"Maalum, that's probably the *worst* thing you could do. You're running away from your fears."

"Actually, I was walking *to* school," Maalum told her. "I felt like taking the journey by myself."

"Of course you were," said Hekima, rolling her eyes in a fashion that told Maalum she wasn't at all convinced by his answer,

which happened to be the truth. "And even if that were true, then I wouldn't allow it. It's far too dangerous out here in the jungle for a young bird like you."

"It can't be *that* bad, Mom," Maalum argued. "I'm bigger than everyone else – just who is going to attack me?"

"You'd be surprised," Hekima said. She looked to the skies, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that even if you think you're the biggest, there's always something bigger than you. You never know what could be lurking out there..."

"I'd be careful," Maalum assured her. "I promise."

Hekima chuckled, ruffling the top of her son's head with a wing. "Of course you would, Maalum," she said. "When you're older. But for now, I think you should make the most of your mother. I won't be here for ever, you know."

"Yeah, right," Maalum chuckled. "I bet you'll live to be three hundred years old!"

"If only, Maalum," said Hekima, a hint of solemnness to her voice. "If only..."

After a rather tedious lesson on, as Maarifa called it, "the mechanics of aqua motion" – how water moved – Maalum sat beside a tree with Kipanya, watching mindlessly as the other kids played, whiling away their break.

"Look at them," Kipanya said disdainfully. "They're pigeons. All of them."

"What do you mean, pigeons?" asked Maalum.

"They're never going to get anywhere in life," Kipanya said. "Isn't it obvious? They waste all their time bothering us, so they never spend any time learning. Did you hear Kulevya while Maarifa was showing us that river? She called us 'freaky'."

"Well, to be fair, you don't really listen much, either," Maalum retorted. "While Maarifa was explaining how to distil the water, you were trying to splash Maana."

"I almost got him," Kipanya declared, sounding quite proud of himself.

"You hit me instead," Maalum replied. He shook his wing, allowing a few droplets of water to spill over onto the ground. "My feathers are still damp."

"We'll *both* get him next time," Kipanya told him. "You hold the creep down with your toes, while I smash his head in with a rock!"

"Who on earth uses a rock as a murder weapon?" Maalum wondered.

"It would be a *big* rock!" Kipanya exclaimed. "Come on – it's one of my dreams. I'm allowed to dream, aren't I?"

"Of course you are," Maalum said. "I'm just saying that it wouldn't be too effective. My dad usually just goes for the throat and tears it wide open."

Kipanya narrowed his eyes at the giant golden eagle. "For someone who's not violent, you sure know a lot about technique."

Maalum shrugged. "My dad talks a lot during dinner. He's not the brightest bird in the nest, but he could speak for hours about hunting down food."

"I should meet him sometime," Kipanya said, his eyes glinting with thoughts of hunting down mice and swallowing them whole. "Maybe we could go on a little hunting expedition together."

"Hey – *I'm* supposed to be your friend," Maalum said.

"But the problem is that my friend doesn't believe in violence," said Kipanya. "I need something to chew on! And all this natural

goodness here just isn't going to cut it. I mean, look..."

He picked up a stick, popping it into his mouth. His jaws clamped down on it. "Does this look appetising to you?"

Maalum shook his head. "Uh, no."

Kipanya spat the stick out onto the ground. "Exactly. I need meat. Thick, juicy meat..." He almost drooled at the prospect. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to scout for a mouse."

The cub strode off, only for Maalum to pull him back with one of his powerful wings. "Wait! You can't just go running off!"

"Of course I can," Kipanya said, looking at Maalum over his shoulder. "It's what I do."

"But what if Maana shows up again?" Maalum asked, his voice laced with worry. Fear was evident in his eyes. "He'll hurt me."

"I keep telling ya: all you have to do is clobber him over the head," Kipanya advised. "One clonk and he's down."

"You know I don't do that," Maalum said.

"Fine," Kipanya said, rolling his eyes. He sat back down on the ground. "I'll listen to you. I suppose I'll have to delay my proposition until tomorrow, then."

"Proposition?" Maalum looked confused. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

Kipanya folded his forepaws. "I *was* going to invite you to my home for dinner," he revealed, much to Maalum's surprise. "But since I can't hunt right now, I simply won't have the time to cook until tomorrow."

"You want me at your house?" asked Maalum.

"I'm trying to build on this 'friendship' thing," Kipanya explained. "And I think it's only fair that you enjoy one of my home-cooked meals."

"What do you cook?" Maalum said.

"*Mice*, of course!" replied Kipanya. "I do a mean fried mouse. I can even smother it with caterpillar slime if you *really* want some spicy dinner."

"You learned how to cook?" Maalum smiled at his friend. For someone who wasn't the most attentive listener – Kipanya didn't pay attention in any of Maarifa's lessons – he knew a lot of good skills. Cooking was one of them.

"Yep," Kipanya said. "It's kinda necessary when you have to take care of yourself. I don't have the luxury of being cuddled and spoiled by parents."

"I see," said Maalum. "Well, I'd be delighted to come – once I've asked my parents, of course."

"Hmm... there's a thought," said Kipanya, stroking his chin with a paw. "If you go ask your parents after school, then that gives me time to hunt down a few mice!"

"That's a great idea!" Maalum exclaimed. He was excited at the thought of having a meal with his friend – especially considering that this was only on his second day of school. He must have made quite an impression on the young lion cub! "I really appreciate this, Kipanya. It means a lot to me."

"Don't sweat it," said Kipanya.

"I won't. I'm a bird. I can't sweat," Maalum said.

"Did I mention that you're one hundred per cent weird?"

"No."

"Okay – you're one hundred per cent weird."

And – for what reason, he didn't know – Maalum smiled.

"See you later!" Kipanya said, before rushing off into a cluster of bushes.

It was the end of the school day. Maalum was left waiting for his mother at the edge of the clearing, just like the day before. He was hoping that she would be more punctual this time; he didn't feel like being scared to death again.

The great golden eagle watched as his friend vanished from sight, setting out to hunt down some mice for their dinner this evening.

Maalum just hoped that his parents would allow him to go. It was only his second day, so he feared that they wouldn't approve, feeling that he needed more time to develop his friendship with Kipanya.

But he thought that it seemed pretty developed already. They got on really well together. After all, Kipanya was hardly dangerous. At least, not to him, anyway...

"Stuck waiting?" asked a voice.

Maalum whipped round to see Tajiri. She was smiling at him in her usual friendly way.

He couldn't help but smile back. She was just too beautiful for him. Ever since they'd talked the previous evening, she was all he could think about until falling asleep. And even when he was asleep, he dreamt about her – although what happened in the dreams was very much a private matter..

"Uh... yeah," Maalum said. "My mom should be here any minute now. I did tell her I could walk here by myself, but you know what parents are like."

"Mine trust me to walk home by myself," Tajiri said, staring up at him. It was a rare alteration to the formula, where a female golden eagle was normally larger than the male. But Maalum had to remind himself that he was far from normal. "But some parents are different from others."

"It was nice talking to you last night," Maalum blurted out, before he even realised what he was saying. "I really liked it."

Tajiri giggled. "Uh... I really liked it, too. You're pretty different, Maalum. I'm sorry I didn't manage to talk to you today. Kulevya kept me a little sidetracked."

Maalum knew that Tajiri was friends with Kulevya. He didn't like her; she'd called him and Kipanya "freaky" when they were at the river.

"Kulevya?" said Maalum.

"Yeah," Tajiri said. "She keeps trying to get me to go to this 'secret place' or something. Apparently, it's filled with all these flowers and stuff that make you feel really happy if you sniff them. I'm not really that interested, though. It doesn't sound very trustworthy."

"You should do what you like," Maalum said. "You make your own choices in life."

"You say all the right things, Maalum," Tajiri told him.

"Good," Maalum said. "As long as I don't say all the wrong things, I'm happy."

"We should meet sometime," Tajiri suggested. "I think I'd like to get to know you more – if that's cool with you."

"It's pretty girl— I mean, it's pretty cool with me!" Maalum said, blushing beneath his feathers.

"Then how about this evening?" asked Tajiri. "By the river? You know – the one Maarifa showed us earlier. I'm sure it's a lot quieter when there isn't an entire class around."

"Sure!" Maalum agreed. "Of course! I'll be there!"

Tajiri's smile widened. "Great," she said. "I'll see you tonight, then."

She then walked off down the path. Maalum waved after her. "Bye!"

Lowering his wing, Maalum sighed. *Yes!* he thought, resisting

the urge to jump up and down in joy. *I've got a date with Tajiri!*

The great golden eagle was then suddenly reminded of his prior commitment to Kipanya; they were supposed to be having dinner together.

Oh, no, Maalum thought dejectedly. *How on earth am I gonna have dinner with Kipanya and go on a date with Tajiri?*

It was quite a dilemma. He didn't want to miss out on the chance to be with the bird of his dreams, nor did he want to ruin his friendship with Kipanya so soon after it had already begun.

Damn it! Maalum felt like tearing out his feathers in frustration. He then took a deep breath, composing himself. *Still, where there's a wing, there's a way. That's what Mom always says.*

"Maalum?"

Maalum turned to look up at his mother, who had finally arrived. "Oh. Hey, Mom."

"I hope you don't mind me being late again," she said. "Your father kept me occupied with something... important."

"Another hunt?" asked Maalum.

"No," Hekima said nervously. "We were just... spending time together."

"Oh," said Maalum. "Well, I have to ask you something, anyway."

"What is it, Maalum?" asked Hekima.

"Well..."

AN: Uh-oh – it looks like Maalum is in trouble now! He can't possibly have dinner with Kipanya and go on a date with Tajiri – or can he? I wonder if he's resourceful enough to figure something out... We can only hope.

Anyway, drop a review, and I'll see you next time!

AN: Since I wanted a little break from *Poison*, I've decided to post another chapter of this lovely prequel story. That's not a problem, though, is it? I hope not.

The Hermit

Chapter Nine: Dinner with Kipanya

"He really would like me to join him for dinner," Maalum explained when he returned to the nest. He was standing on his tiptoes, eager for his mother to let him eat with his friend for the evening. "And he's the most awesome friend ever, Mom. You've gotta believe me!"

Hekima chuckled, smiling down at her son. "Of course I believe you, Maalum," she said. "It's nice to see that you've finally made some friends. I guess all of your previous worries have faded away, hmm?"

"Uh... sure," Maalum said, glancing aside. He didn't particularly care to mention that he was still scared straight of Maana roughing him up at some point. "So, can I go? It would mean a lot to him – and me!"

"Go where?" Afya asked, landing suddenly in the nest. "Ah – you must have finally set up a hot date, huh? Who's the lucky chick?"

"No, Dad, I actually—"

"Well, what you need to do is use those huge talons, grab her by the hips and give her a good—"

Hekima snapped Afya's beak shut with a wing. "Afya, I think that's enough romantic conversation for now," she said sternly. "It's best that he learns these things when he's older. *Much* older."

Maalum hadn't told them that he had also scheduled a date with

Tajiri. At first, he was worried that he wouldn't be able to attend both events at the same time. However, he had devised a cunning plan. He was simply going to have dinner with Kipanya first, and then meet with Tajiri at the river. That way, he wouldn't be letting either of them down. Maalum was pretty proud of himself for coming up with that.

"So... am I allowed or not?" Maalum asked. He crossed his talons and hoped for the best.

"I suppose so," Hekima said. "As long as you stay away from the dangerous areas of the jungle and are home by sundown."

"It's a deal," Maalum said, before giving his mother a slight nuzzle with his feathers. "Thanks, Mom!" He hurried towards the edge of the nest.

"You going already?" Afya asked, having had his beak released by Hekima.

"I've gotta hurry," Maalum muttered. "Don't want to be late."

And with that, he had spread his enormous wings and was zipping through the trees of the jungle.

"I'm happy to see he's finally made an improvement," Hekima said, smiling. "Looks like he might fit in after all."

"Yeah..."

Hekima immediately noticed that Afya looked somewhat worried. "Afya... what's wrong?"

"There's a problem," Afya told his mate. "He's back."

"I knew you'd show up," Kipanya said, welcoming Maalum into his home, which was little more than a small dusty patch of earth with a few huge rocks scattered here and there. The tall trees provided nice shelter from the rain, though, which was a bonus. He had a suitable living space. "You're a good guy, Maalum. You've got potential."

"Potential to do what?" Maalum asked.

"To rip apart huge creatures with your bare talons," Kipanya replied. "*I like it!*"

"I wasn't planning on doing anything violent tonight," Maalum said, sitting himself down on one of the rocks. "I thought we were just having dinner."

"We are," Kipanya said. "Dinner that I've *hunted*."

The lion cub padded over to a nearby bush, reaching into it and pulling out a large mouse. "Look what I've got," he announced, showing him the mouse. "That's a big one, isn't it? Almost managed to get away – but my speed was too much for him."

"Congratulations," Maalum said, examining the mouse. "I guess that's good enough for the two of us to eat."

"Of course it is," Kipanya said, sitting down on a nearby rock. He snapped the mouse in half with his teeth, before throwing one half to Maalum. "Eat up. It should be nice and meaty; I only caught it less than an hour ago."

Within five minutes, Maalum had finished off the mouse. It was very tasty, to say the least. Kipanya had proven himself to be an exception hunter. The great golden eagle wouldn't have been surprised if he became the best hunter of an entire pride someday.

"That was wonderful, Kipanya," Maalum said, smiling at his friend.

"It was nothing," Kipanya said modestly with a wave of his paw. "Usually, I cook the food by roasting it – but I didn't have enough time."

Maalum grinned, impressed by him. "You know how to cook?"

"Uh... yeah," Kipanya admitted, somewhat embarrassed by it. He scratched his neck nervously. "It's a little knack of mine."

"When did you learn how to do that?" Maalum wondered, his curiosity piqued.

"I just learned," Kipanya explained, "like with a lot of other things. No one else is around to help me; I've gotta help myself. That's the way it is out here in the jungle."

"So... you've lived here for a while now, huh?" said Maalum.

Kipanya nodded. "Yep. Ever since my parents... Well, never mind."

Maalum decided that he didn't want to be intrusive. "It's okay," he assured him. "I know you don't like to talk about it."

"Maybe one day I'll tell ya," Kipanya said. "For the moment, though, it's something I like to keep to myself."

"I understand," Maalum said, getting up from the rock. "Well, gotta go. Thanks for the dinner."

Maalum tried to leave, but Kipanya was quick to stop him. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" the cub cried, holding up his forepaws. "What's the hurry? If you're going off to hunt more food, then I'd be happy to join you."

"Nah – it's my parents," Maalum lied, knowing that he had to get out quickly if he wanted to have his date with Tajiri. The sun was beginning to set; he didn't have an awful lot of time to spare. "They're quite protective. They don't want me staying out too long."

"But you've only been here for five minutes," Kipanya protested. "What kind of stupid parents are they?"

"I know, I know," Maalum said with a shrug. "But what can you do? I guess we'll have to do this again some other time. I'll see you in school tomorrow, anyway."

Kipanya sighed. "All right, then," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow. Come back any time, of course. It's not like I've got anything else better to do."

"I'll be sure to do that!" Maalum proclaimed.

Kipanya grinned. *"I like it!"*

"Goodbye," Maalum said, before spreading his wings and taking to the air. He hoped that he would be able to reach the river in time. What would Tajiri think of him if he failed to turn up? He would be a most hated creature indeed.

Luckily, Maalum had fledged into a very good flier, so the river was a mere two minutes away if he maintained his current speed.

I wonder how the date will go, Maalum thought excitedly. She might even kiss me!

But, unfortunately for the great golden eagle, he failed to detect the enormous dark shadow swooping past him...

AN: Well, Maalum just managed to scrap through the dinner. But you heard what Afya said. "He's back." But who is he? Does he have anything to do with that sinister shadow swooping past our favourite golden eagle? We'll have to wait and see...

AN: From the last chapter, I'm sure you can tell that there's a looming threat. That's never a good thing. You know what my villains are like... Still, I have some time to squeeze in a bit of romance, too. Enjoy!

Chapter Ten: A Date with Destiny

"He's back?"

Hekima, usually quite a calm and collected creature, suddenly looked like she was about to break down in tears upon hearing this distressing news from her mate. Their happy family atmosphere had finally been disrupted.

"I heard from some other eagles that he's back in the area," Afya explained, looking just as worried as she did. It was far from a normal occurrence for such feared creatures like golden

eagles to be scared. Usually, everyone else was scared of them. That wasn't the case right now, however. "I don't know whether he's found us or not."

"But... but how?" Hekima asked, seemingly lost for words. "How can he be back after all this time? I thought we'd gotten rid of him... That was why we moved away."

"Maybe he doesn't know we're here," Afya said, trying to appear optimistic. "He might go away if—"

"We have the best nest in the jungle," Hekima interrupted. "He can spot us easily."

"Then just what are we supposed to do?" Afya asked, eyes wide with panic. "Move away again? We can't let him find us."

"It's not us that I'm worried about," Hekima told him, casting a glance into the maze of trees that made up the jungle.

"Maalum..."

Afya followed her gaze, his face falling in despair. "Oh, no," he said. "But... he doesn't know that we have a son, does he?"

"He finds out everything, sooner or later," Hekima responded. "And if he goes after Maalum, then... I don't know what I'll do."

"We have to find him," Afya said. "Letting him go out on his own was a bad idea from the start. We should have kept him here, where we can keep an eye on him."

"Then move it," Hekima ordered, hurrying towards the edge of the nest.

The two parents were about to fly off, when a cold, menacing voice invaded the nest.

"Going somewhere, lovebirds?"

"Tajiri!"

Maalum smiled at the sight of the female golden eagle, hurrying

over to her as fast as he could. It only took him about three steps, since he was so huge. He seemed to grow bigger every day, easily double the size of an average golden eagle. It was more than impressive to look at.

Tajiri was sat by the edge of the river, dipping her feet into the water. Her eyes seemed to glow with delight upon spotting Maalum walking towards her. You couldn't wipe the smile off her beak if you tried.

"Maalum!" She leapt to her feet, rushing over to greet him. "I was beginning to worry for a second there. You're a little late."

"Yeah," Maalum said, smiling awkwardly at her. "I had a little bit of trouble finding the river. I can be such a klutz sometimes. I may be big, but I don't have a huge brain."

He wasn't going to tell Tajiri that he had actually been having dinner with Kipanya. He had to make their date sound like the most important event of his night, which it was.

"I'm sure you're very smart," Tajiri complimented, staring up at him. "Probably more intelligent than you think."

"You really believe that?" Maalum asked, ecstatic on the inside that Tajiri thought so highly of him.

"Of course," Tajiri said with a nod. "So, uh, why don't we sit down?"

"Oh. Yeah," Maalum said, sitting down beside the river with Tajiri. "Of course."

They both planted their feet in the water.

"That's better," Tajiri said.

The great golden eagle stared down at his feet in the water, realising how much bigger they were than Tajiri's. It occurred to him in that moment that his enormous size was abnormal – and perhaps even intimidating – to most, if not all of the animals on earth. There weren't going to be many things bigger than him...

"Sorry about my size," Maalum said. "It must make your neck ache to keep looking up at my face all the time."

"It's not a problem," Tajiri said. "Your size makes you unique, Maalum. You're very original."

"I guess so," Maalum agreed. "I mean, I don't think there's anyone else as freakish as me in the jungle."

"I don't think you're freakish," Tajiri said. "The size is good on you, Maalum. It makes you look... handsome."

"Handsome?" Now that was something he never expected to hear from her. But he would certainly take what he was given. "But I'm... I'm ugly."

Tajiri chuckled. "Yeah, right," she said. "Maana is ugly. You have to be one of the cutest animals I've ever laid eyes on."

"Wow," Maalum said, his eyes wide with shock. Tajiri really liked him. And he really liked her. She was mesmerising, to say the least. He could hardly take his eyes off her. "That... that really means a lot, Tajiri."

"It's the truth," Tajiri said. "At least, to me it is. You look... special."

Tajiri rested her head against Maalum's side, taking him by surprise. *Wow... He was stunned. The most beautiful creature on earth likes you. He felt totally smitten. If only you could tell her how you feel...*

The female golden eagle placed her talons on his, smiling up at him. "I've liked you for a while now, Maalum," she admitted. "Do you like me?"

Maalum chuckled, his heart pounding in his chest. His nerves felt worse than ever; he wasn't sure if he could even speak properly. "Uh... well, sure. Of course I like you."

"No," Tajiri said, gazing deep into his orange eyes. "Do you *like* me?"

Entranced by her beauty, Maalum felt lost. He wanted to say yes – he wanted it desperately – but he wasn't sure if it could work out or not. Would their relationship last? Or would she find him to be a repulsive creature later on down the line? There was no way of telling... It made him more than nervous. It made him scared.

"Well..." Maalum took a deep breath, feeling as though his heart was going to burst right out of his chest. "Yes."

Tajiri's smile widened. "Yes?"

He then exhaled deeply, collapsing onto his back. "But..."

Tajiri flew up onto Maalum's chest, lying down on her stomach. His fluffy feathers made for a comfortable resting spot. "But what?"

Maalum averted her stare. "It's just that... it might not work out," he said. "What if I end up scaring you later, or saying something that makes you hate me?"

"You won't do that," Tajiri assured him. "You're not like other animals, Maalum. I'm sure of it."

"But... it might not last," Maalum said. "I'll just keep getting bigger and bigger, while you stay the same." He looked at Tajiri, who was lying down on his big chest like it was some kind of cosy bed.

"I don't care about that," Tajiri said. "I'm never going to lose sight of you, if that's the case."

He remembered what his mother had said. "I could crush you with my pinky toe," he told her. "What if I hurt you by accident?"

"But you won't," Tajiri countered. "I'm pretty sure that you would be careful, Maalum. You wouldn't just stomp all over your mate, now, would you?"

"Mate?" said Maalum, raising an eyebrow.

"That's what we'll be," she said. "Someday. If you want."

Oh, I'd want that more than anything, he thought. But this is never going to work. I can't even hunt...

"Tajiri... you're beautiful," Maalum said. "You really are. It's just that..."

Tajiri stared at him with hopeful eyes. "Maalum... can't we try? I know you're scared – I am, too – but we should give it a go at least."

"You're scared, too?" asked Maalum.

Tajiri nodded. "I've never had a... well, a boyfriend before," she confessed. "I hatched about three months ago, but my mother says we often mature a lot faster than other creatures. I guess that explains why I like you so much."

"That makes sense," Maalum agreed, enjoying the feel of her feathers against his. "I really like you, too – despite the unrelenting fear."

"Then let's be scared together," Tajiri said, trapping him with her stare.

The great golden eagle thought for a moment. "That could work."

Tajiri beamed at him. "I think it could, too."

She placed one of her wings against Maalum's chest, feeling the rhythmic pulse of his heart. It was beating quite frantically.

"You've got a big heart," she said, tracing little circles in his feathers with the tip of her wing. "I think that's something we could all use. And I don't mean in a physical sense, either."

Maalum's insides turned to sludge at that moment. *I think I'm in love...*

AN: Aww... I quite enjoyed writing this chapter. I think it's been

quite a while since I wrote a proper romance, discarding the gay Simba/Haiba pairing in *Coming Out*. Maalum/Tajiri is quite a sweet pairing, isn't it? Still, romance aside, it looks like someone nasty has arrived in Hekima and Afya's nest. Who is he? Maybe we'll discover that some other time...

AN: This is the moment you have all been waiting for: the reveal of a brand-new villain! Sure, we like seeing old favourites like Hago and Shocker – but it's always good to showcase a new form of evil!

Chapter Eleven: The Debt

Afya and Hekima whipped round in surprise, staring fearfully up at the intimidating creature that towered over them. The tables had finally been turned. Rather than them being the predators, they had now become the prey.

The beast in question was what appeared to be an enormous golden eagle. Nowhere near as tall as Maalum, but still pretty big. He easily created a sense of deep dread in the pits of the two parents' stomachs. His dark orange eyes burned into their souls.

"Oh, this is so sweet," said the eagle, smiling unpleasantly at them. "The valiant parents flying off to save their sweet little boy from certain danger. It warms the cockles of my heart – if I *had* a heart, that is."

"What do you want from us, Vurugu?" Hekima demanded.

"It's *King* Vurugu to you," he replied sharply. "And don't think that I haven't forgotten about the little debt that you two owe me."

"What are you talking about? We did everything you told us to," Afya protested. "We hunted your food for you; that was the agreement."

"Oh, yeah – that was the deal, shrimp," said King Vurugu. "And

I'm emphasising the past tense there. But you know what you did."

Hekima and Afya exchanged a glance with each other, as if they were both hiding some kind of secret that they didn't particularly want to reveal.

"Okay," said Hekima, putting a brave face on. "Then what did we do?"

King Vurugu chuckled. "You broke one of the rules of the kingdom," he said. "And that's something that I don't easily forgive. You know what happened to those other birds who made the mistake of messing with me."

Hekima's head was instantly filled with images of birds with their throats slit open and their guts torn from their stomachs. "Yeah. I do."

"Then why – even though I employed you as loyal hunters – did you persist in hoarding food from me for your own consumption?" asked King Vurugu. He shook his head. "That's something that simply can't go unnoticed."

"You made everyone starve, Vurugu," Afya argued. "You gave us little more than scraps and bones. We're large creatures; we need more than just salvage."

"Exactly," Hekima said, siding with her mate. "Maybe if you didn't keep it all for your greedy self, then—"

King Vurugu let out a loud growl, instantly silencing the female golden eagle.

"You keep making things worse for yourself," he said. "And don't try to make it look like I'm the bad guy. You stole, so you pay the price. You are in my debt. Deal with it."

"We are no longer in your kingdom," Afya told him. "You can't do anything to us. I'm sure that the Pride Lands lions wouldn't approve of—"

King Vurugu chuckled. "You think that the Pride Lands have any jurisdiction over what I can and cannot do? You used to be members of my kingdom, so you are my responsibility. It's only fair, after all."

"*Fair?*" chuckled Hekima. "You have a very sick idea of what fair is, Vurugu."

"It's *King* Vurugu!" the menacing eagle yelled. "I'm not leaving until I've got what I came here for."

"And just what is that?" Afya asked. "We have nothing of any value, so you're just wasting your time."

"Maybe not from a birdbrain such as yourself," retorted King Vurugu, "but a debt can easily be repaid with some... female companionship."

He pointed at Hekima with the tip of his wing.

"You're a very lovely bird, Hekima," King Vurugu said. "The feisty ones are always the best. I'm sure we could be very happy together, with you as my queen."

"I will *never* be your mate," Hekima declared vehemently, anger burning in her eyes. "I belong with Afya."

"You have no say in the matter," King Vurugu told Hekima, much to her distress. "If you don't come with me, then I will kill your precious dumbo of a mate. However, if you agree to be my blissfully wedded wife, then he will live."

"No!" Hekima shouted in despair. She knew that King Vurugu had the power to kill both of them. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her beloved Afya... "You can't do this!"

"Oh, don't be like that. I'm sure you'll love being my wife, Hekima," King Vurugu said with a triumphant grin. "You'll cook and clean and massage my feet and clip my thick yellow toenails! Hey – marriage is no picnic."

"You're vile!" Hekima spat.

"Now, that's no way to treat your mate, Hekima," King Vurugu said. He glanced at Afya. "You'd better get out of here, lover boy. Before something *really* bad happens."

Afya stood his ground. "I'm staying where I am," he said. "You're not taking her from me."

King Vurugu chuckled. It was an irritating sound. "If you're going to fight back, then I'm afraid I have no choice but to execute you."

Afya's eyes narrowed in fury. He'd had enough.

With an almighty screech – an action which was very common of their species – he leapt at King Vurugu, talons outstretched.

He was impaled through the stomach and thrown from the nest in a matter of seconds.

King Vurugu made it look all too easy. He was a bird who had killed many times before, and had no qualms with doing it many times again in the future.

Hekima let out a solemn screech for her dying mate, watching with tearful eyes as he plummeted towards the earth below. Afya fell into a bush, disappearing from sight.

Consumed with fury, Hekima lashed out at the evil king, unable to control herself as she attempted to hack his head off with her talons.

Vurugu grabbed Hekima by the legs with a single foot, lifting her up from the ground. She writhed and shook in an attempt to escape, but was severely unsuccessful.

"Foolish bird," King Vurugu said, his sickly yellow talons clenching around her legs. "I did offer him the chance to leave, so you can't blame me. He could have found some other chick to mate with. Oh, well. There's one idiot born every minute."

"*Let go of me!*" Hekima squealed. "*Let go!*"

"Why on earth would I do that, my dear?" the evil eagle responded. "It's a brand-new beginning for us both. The start of a long and fruitful marriage. Now, why don't we retreat to my palace? I can think of a few things that we can do for our honeymoon..."

Hekima let out a disgusted sob as King Vurugu spread his wings and took to the skies, flying high over the jungle with her held firmly in his villainous grasp.

Realising that she was stuck in a hopeless situation, Hekima remained silent, tears drizzling down her face as she wallowed in her grief. Her mate was dead, and she would never see her son again.

She had lost everything.

I'm so sorry, Maalum, she thought. I'm so sorry...

AN: God, King Vurugu is disgusting, isn't he? What an awful creature. But I'm renowned for creating such degenerate forms of scum, so it's hardly surprising. Poor Hekima, poor Afya, and poor Maalum. That family has been torn apart, and all because of one malicious eagle. Damn!

AN: Well, after that particularly nasty chapter where we met the dreaded King Vurugu, we know two things: Afya is dead and Hekima is now his slave. Oh, and Maalum doesn't know, either. Oh, boy...

Chapter Twelve: A Night Becomes a Nightmare

"This has been one of the best nights of my life," Maalum said, staring down at Tajiri, who had been cuddling with him throughout the evening. "I mean, it's just... wow."

Tajiri giggled. "I guess I could say the same," she replied, smiling at him. "I told you that I'd never had a boyfriend before. This is... new. It's good."

Maalum knew that it was way past sundown by now, and that his parents would probably kill him when he returned to the nest, but he didn't care. After all, his mother had been late picking him up from school a few times; wasn't it fair that he was late returning to them? They deserved to get a taste of their own medicine for once.

And besides, he was with the girl of his dreams right now. Tajiri was simply the most beautiful creature on earth; it would be a crime not to spend more time with her. She deserved it.

"It's perfect for me," Maalum told her, caressing her back with one of his huge wings. She seemed very content with resting in his feathers. Maybe being an enormous golden eagle had its perks after all. "You're just... beautiful."

"Thank you, Maalum," Tajiri said. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Even though I'm huge?" asked Maalum.

"*Because* you're huge," Tajiri retorted, staring into his eyes. She stroked his feathers in an affectionate way. "You have to be very special to be this way, Maalum. I'm sure of that. There's always a reason for something."

"You think I'm a freak of nature for a reason?" said Maalum, raising his eyebrows in doubt. "I don't think so. It's just a stupid accident."

"You're not an accident," Tajiri assured him. "You're amazing."

"I could stay here all night," Maalum said, quite content with doing so. He stared up at the full moon. "It's late now. Mom and Dad are gonna kill me..."

"I don't think my parents will be too happy, either," Tajiri said. "Still... I suppose this is worth it."

"*Definitely*," Maalum replied. Even though he was disobeying his parents, he knew that this was one of the most important nights of his life. It could change everything. If it did work out,

then he and Tajiri could grow to become eternal mates. He wanted that more than anything...

"Yeah," Tajiri said. "I don't think I've ever been happier than this."

"Neither have I," Maalum agreed, gazing into Tajiri's eyes.

The two golden eagles lay there for a little while longer, talking and laughing as their relationship strengthened with each passing moment. Maalum and Tajiri were well on their way to becoming loving mates; it was a love that rivalled even that of Afya and Hekima.

Of course, Maalum was unaware that his parents' relationship had ended quite some time ago – and not under conventional circumstances. He was far too enraptured by Tajiri's presence to worry about their wellbeing...

It was a mistake that he would live to regret.

"Well..." Maalum stared down at Tajiri as they stood at the edge of a path. "Enjoy yourself?"

"I think that's pretty obvious, don't you?" she replied, obviously quite smitten with him. "I certainly hope that you're interested in doing it again sometime."

"Whenever you want," Maalum said. "Tomorrow? Same time, same place?"

"Fine by me," Tajiri said. "As long as I get to see you again. After this, I don't think you're going to feel like much of an outcast anymore."

"Maybe not," Maalum said, despite his doubts about himself. "But... now that I've met you, I feel happier."

"If you're happy, *I'm* happy," Tajiri said. She flew up and nuzzled Maalum on the cheek, seemingly not bothered by the fact that she would have to take extra effort in order to be

affectionate with him. She really didn't mind his size after all. "See you tomorrow, Maalum. Sweet dreams."

"Bye, Tajiri," Maalum said, watching with admiration as she flew off into the air. He sighed dreamily, happier than ever. "I love you..."

Thoroughly convinced that he was in love with the most beautiful creature he had ever encounter, Maalum turned around and decided to head back to the nest. He hoped that his parents hadn't decided to go out looking for him or something. It was a possibility, however. Still, he was a huge eagle – an intimidating sight to most – so didn't they think he could take care of himself?

I'd better get back, Maalum thought, spreading his huge wings and taking off. *It's not like they have any reason to worry, anyway. I'm fine.*

His parents, however, were not.

"Mom? Dad?"

Maalum touched down on the nest, looking around. The nest was completely deserted, however. His parents were nowhere to be seen.

"Mom! Dad!" Maalum called out louder this time. "You around here?"

No answer.

"Oh, great," Maalum muttered, rolling his eyes. They'd obviously gone searching for him, since he'd been out so late. "I wish they'd stop worrying so much..."

Maalum sighed, wondering what to do. He pondered on whether he should try to find his parents or whether he should just wait for them.

"Mom! Dad!" He was screaming now, hoping in vain that they

would hear him and put their worries to rest.

"Maalum..."

The great golden eagle's eyes widened upon hearing the raspy voice. He recognised it, even though it sounded very frail and weak. Damaged, even.

It was the voice of his father.

"Dad?"

"M-Maalum..."

It sounded like his voice was coming from the bottom of the tree. Maalum couldn't understand why on earth his father would be down there.

"Dad?"

Maalum extended his wings and fluttered down to the bottom of the tree, touching down on the ground below. He surveyed the cluster of bushes and plants at the base of the tree, looking for any sign of his father.

And then he saw him.

Afya was lying in a bush on his back, blood pouring from a gaping wound in his stomach. It looked like a talon attack; Maalum knew how to recognise them.

"Dad!"

The great golden eagle hurried over to his father. He looked in an awful state. His eyes were half closed, and it looked as though he was fighting fiercely to remain alive. But it didn't look as though any amount of willpower would help in that regard...

"Maalum..." Blood dribbled from his beak as Afya spoke. More and more life was fading away from his father by the second.

"Dad, what happened?" Maalum sank to his knees, staring at his mortally wounded father in horror.

"Maalum... dying..." Afya was finding it incredibly difficult to speak. "He... he got me..."

Maalum stared at his father, tears streaming from his eyes. "Dad, what are you talking about? And where's Mom?"

"He... took her..."

"Who?" Maalum asked. "Who took Mom?"

"Vurugu..."

And then Afya died.

"Dad?" Maalum shook his father, to no avail. "*Dad?*"

No response. His father had perished.

"No..." Maalum could only stare helplessly at his father's corpse, knowing that he was now gone for ever. He wasn't a foolish child; he knew that when someone died, they stayed dead – and that was it. He would join the Great Wings of the Past, as his mother called them. "No..."

The great golden eagle stared up at the starry sky – which had only minutes ago seemed so appealing to him – and screeched at the heavens.

AN: Oh, what a miserable concoction of misery and woe that I've mixed up! Maalum's happy night has turned into an absolute tragedy. King Vurugu has torn everything apart! He must be stopped! But is Maalum in any fit state to try and find him? I wonder if our favourite golden eagle is up to the challenge...

AN: Deeper and darker we go, as Maalum discovers that Afya has been killed and King Vurugu has captured his mother to be his mate. Will Maalum be able to cope with the grief? And what will King Vurugu do to Hekima? Well, I will answer those questions now...

Chapter Thirteen: The Palace of King Vurugu

After sitting beside his father's dead body for what seemed like hours – and very painful hours at that – Maalum finally stood up, looking away from the ugly sight and trying to decide on what his next move should be.

The great golden eagle wiped tears from his eyes with a giant wing, feeling hollow on the inside after losing both his parents. As far as he was concerned, they were both dead now. His father for real, and his mother in a metaphorical sense. He was never going to see her again, so she might as well be dead.

Maalum took a few steps forward, far too afraid to look back on his father's corpse. It was a sight that he never wanted to think about ever again, let alone witness. Just knowing that his parents were gone for good was more than he could bear. All happy thoughts of his time with Tajiri had been instantly erased from his mind. The despair and the death were a far more potent memory. One that couldn't be buried; instead, it would fester in his mind for the rest of his life.

No... no... no...

Maalum didn't get much further before he collapsed to his knees again, sobbing as he pressed his beak into the dirt.

He didn't blame himself for their deaths. Maybe if they had been away from the nest looking for him, then it would have been a different story. But they had been at the nest; there was nothing he could have done, even if he was there.

Still, the death of a parent was the death of a parent. It was one of the most horrible things that one could experience. A saddening feeling unlike any other.

His heart aching with loneliness, the great golden eagle felt totally lost. He couldn't possibly imagine what he was going to do now. Without his parents, how would he survive? His father hadn't even taught him how to hunt; he couldn't catch any food. He hadn't even managed to make it through two weeks of

school.

In that moment, even though he was the most magnificent creature in the jungle, he had never felt more pathetic.

Maalum rolled onto his back, staring with miserable eyes up at the stars. The sky didn't look at all appealing to him anymore; the darkness felt cold and cruel. The light wind that whistled through his feathers gave him a nasty chill. The world just felt... evil.

More tears dribbled down Maalum's cheeks; he didn't even bother to wipe them away. The great golden eagle merely basked in his grief, unable to do or say anything. He wouldn't have minded dying there and then. There was nothing left for him now. He was doomed.

The great golden eagle sniffled, his father's final words echoing in his mind.

"Who? *Who took Mom?*"

"*Vurugu...*"

Vurugu... Vurugu... Vurugu...

He repeated the name over and over again. Wondering who this horrible creature was. Pondering on why he killed his parents. Thinking about how he had ruined his life for ever.

He didn't even know who he was, and yet Maalum despised him already.

Hekima despised King Vurugu more than any other creature. She had met some nasty individuals in her life, but there were none worse than him. He was simply foul, to put it lightly. She felt disgusted just by looking at him.

Stuck in the slimy grasp of his disgusting-looking yellow talons – which Hekima doubted had been groomed properly in quite some time – she had been rendered completely helpless. Her

mate was dead, and no one would be able to help her. She had no choice but to completely submit to the evil king's whims.

It was the only chance she stood of seeing her son again.

Afya, the love of her life, may be dead, but Hekima knew that she at least stood a chance – a fleeting dream – of having a future with her son. Maalum was still alive, as far as she knew, and that gave her some hope at least. If she could find a way back, perhaps by getting on Vurugu's good side, then that would be all she needed.

The evil king zipped through the air, passing over trees and canyons and large rocks. It was a barren area right at the edge of the jungle which Hekima hoped that she would never have to visit again: the kingdom of King Vurugu.

"Home sweet home," remarked King Vurugu with an unpleasant sneer. "It must be so nostalgic to visit your old home again."

"I hate it here," Hekima said bitterly, instantly reminded of how much better their old home in the jungle was. Afya had spent so much time trying to find it so they could start a family together. "It makes me sick."

"There are far sicker things I can do to you, my dear," King Vurugu said threateningly, emphasising the fact that Hekima was now his possession. She had to do everything that he said. "You can be sure of that."

Hekima's stomach twisted in agony at the thought of what Vurugu would do to her. Having lived in his kingdom previously, she knew that no one was ever treated fairly by him. They were all practically slaves...

And, now that she was forcefully made to become Vurugu's mate, she was the most prized slave of them all.

King Vurugu dove towards the ground, heading right for a series of several enormous mountain-like rock structures that shot up from the ground like daggers. Hekima recognised it as his

palace, although it had to be the most ugly-looking palace that she had ever laid eyes on.

The evil king finally released Hekima from his grasp, throwing her into a cave opening built into one of the walls. The female golden eagle grunted in pain as she tumbled and rolled across the rough earth, coming to a halt in the centre of the darkened space.

King Vurugu smiled evilly as he landed on the ground, his ugly talons clicking on the ground as he advanced towards her.

"Ah, it feels so good to be back home after a long flight," he said, stretching out his wings. His feathers looked torn and raggedy, giving him an untidy appearance. It was hardly surprising to Hekima. She could tell by the smell alone that he never washed or groomed himself. "Don't you think so, too, dear?"

Hekima didn't answer. She just stared into his dim orange eyes.

King Vurugu growled, stomping on Hekima's chest with one of his feet, his yellow talons digging into her chest.

Hekima gasped in surprise, shaking with terror. King Vurugu was bigger than her, so she couldn't really do much to try and overpower him. But he wouldn't kill her already... surely?

"I said, *don't you think so, too, dear?*" repeated King Vurugu.

"Yes," Hekima said, hating him more and more by the second.

"Good," said King Vurugu, removing his foot. "Now, I think the first order of business is to do what all great couples do on their honeymoon."

Hekima suppressed the urge to sob, not uttering a single word as the evil king continued to speak.

"We should consummate our marriage!" King Vurugu exclaimed, pulling Hekima to her feet. "It's the only way you'll truly understand my love for you, Hekima."

You don't love me at all, she thought. You just want an object.

"Whatever," Hekima said. She could barely contain her desire to resist and fight back against him. She didn't want to completely submit to being his slave... It would be far too degrading for her. It would crush her spirit.

"Then let us go, my love," King Vurugu said, pushing her towards the far end of the room. "And after that, you can give me my annual toenail-clipping..."

AN: Maalum's soul has been destroyed and King Vurugu continues to be utterly vile. Hekima is sure in an unpleasant situation. It looks like there's no hope for her. It's not like Maalum can find him with ease and confront him. There's no possible way for him to fight back against King Vurugu! Or is there? I wonder..

AN: What possible tragedies will befall our characters this time, I wonder? Maybe none at all! Ha-ha... Oh, I wish...

Chapter Fourteen: Obligation

"Kipanya!"

Kipanya fell from the rock – his sleeping spot – with a jolt, landing roughly on his side. "Ow!"

The cub ambled to his paws, groaning in pain as he looked around in confusion. "Hey! What the—"

"Kipanya, it's me," Maalum said, trying to get through to him as quickly as possible. He didn't have time for messing around.

"It's Maalum."

"*I will claw your eyes out!*" Kipanya threatened in his anger, only to realise mere moments later that his best friend had woken him up. "Oh. It's you. For the love of mice, what the hell are you doing here? It's, like, midnight."

"Look, I need your help," Maalum said, a look of urgency about

him. "Things have... taken a turn for the worse, and I didn't know who else to turn to."

"What are you talking about?" Kipanya asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes with a paw. "We've got school tomorrow. What's so important that you have to wake me up in the middle of the night?"

"My father is dead."

"Ah."

"Now will you listen to me?" said Maalum.

"Uh... I think I can do that," Kipanya replied, visibly disturbed by this revelation. "So, your, uh... dad's dead, huh?"

Maalum nodded gravely. "He was murdered," he said. "I watched him die... He was already half dead by the time I found him."

"Who the hell would want to kill your dad?" Kipanya wondered. "You're a golden eagle – you guys practically rule this jungle. There ain't nothing scarier."

"I don't know what kind of creature they are," Maalum said, "but all I have is a name."

"A name?" said Kipanya. "Well, that's a start. What is it?"

"Vurugu."

Kipanya raised his eyebrows at him. "Vurugu?" He chuckled, amused. "Oh, man, you've gotta be kidding me."

"I'm not joking at all," Maalum said sternly. "Why? Have you heard of him?"

"Vurugu?" said Kipanya. "*King* Vurugu?"

"He's a king?" Maalum asked.

Kipanya nodded, still looking somewhat bemused by the situation. "Uh... yeah," he said. "Lives something like a million

miles away, though. You sure you didn't hear the name correctly or something?"

"I know what I heard," Maalum insisted. "It was definitely Vurugu. So who the hell is this guy?"

The great golden eagle – despite knowing nothing about him by this point – despised Vurugu with all his heart. What kind of a monster killed good animals for no reason? Afya and Hekima were about as perfect as parents could be; they didn't deserve this. It was so unfair!

"King Vurugu is probably the lamest king you've ever heard of," Kipanya told him. "His kingdom is like the opposite of the Pride Lands. Apparently, at least one animal a day commits suicide there."

"Classy," remarked Maalum. "He doesn't sound very nice."

"He's *not* very nice," Kipanya said. "He's about as sausage-y as a sausage can get. Good thing I don't live there anymore."

"You used to *live* in his kingdom?" Maalum exclaimed, hardly able to believe it. How had such an awful place turned out a good soul like Kipanya? It was unfathomable.

"Well... not exactly," said Kipanya, scratching the back of his neck. "I was born there, but my parents moved away after a few days. It was probably too dirty for their liking."

"And then what happened to them?" Maalum wondered.

"I told you before – I don't like to talk about it," Kipanya replied sharply, ever the mysterious about what became of his parents. Maalum couldn't deny that his curiosity was well and truly piqued on the matter...

"Oh," Maalum said in realisation. "Of course."

"My point is that he's a lunatic," Kipanya said. "It doesn't surprise me that he killed your dad – but I don't see why he'd come all the way out here to do it. As I said, his kingdom is

miles away."

"Maybe they knew him before," Maalum mused. "Although I can't think why..."

"Why are you asking me all of this, anyway?" said Kipanya, narrowing his eyes. "There must be a reason for it."

"My reason being that I want to find him," Maalum said. He had a determination in his eyes which Kipanya had never seen before.

The cub just stared up at his giant friend in disbelief. "You... you wanna find him?"

"He kidnapped my mother," Maalum said. "I have to get her back."

Maalum wouldn't rest until his mother was safe again. He couldn't just leave her to die in Vurugu's clutches; he would despise himself for ever. He had to rescue her. It was his... obligation.

"I thought you weren't a violent eagle?" said Kipanya, raising an eyebrow. "Anger changes animals, I guess."

"I never said anything about violence," said Maalum. "I just want to get her back."

Kipanya rolled his eyes. "If you go in there expecting King Vurugu not to put up a fight then you've got another thing coming."

"That's why I want you to come with me."

"Huh?" Kipanya's eyes widened in his mouth dropped open. "What did you say?"

"I want you to come with me," Maalum repeated, taking a step towards the cub. "You're good at fighting, Kipanya. Think about it. You can help me."

"Look, kid, I can't just—"

"Come on," Maalum cut in. "You're the ultimate predator. I bet King Vurugu would be a pushover for you."

"Okay, ya sausage, I think we need to get a few things straight here," Kipanya said, raising a claw. "A fully grown golden eagle is quite different to catching a mouse, and it's going to take a lot more than stamping on him with my paw."

So he's a golden eagle, thought Maalum, somewhat pleased. At least he had the advantage of being much bigger than him; he was the largest golden eagle who ever lived. No one else could match his distinctive size. *That makes things simpler.*

"But you can handle it, right?" asked Maalum. "He can't be—"

"Secondly, he could be a very good fighter too," Kipanya continued. "I bet the guy has talons made of rock."

Hekima moaned in discomfort as her beak clamped down on one of King Vurugu's yellow talons. It felt slimy and sickening on her tongue.

With all of her strength, she used her beak to clip it free of his foot, before immediately spitting it into a pile of identical clippings that lay in the corner of the cave.

"Ah... that's better," said King Vurugu, staring at his feet as he watched Hekima coughing and spluttering on the ground.

"Females always give the best pedicures." He wiggled his toes in malicious delight.

Hekima sobbed as she tried to get the taste of pure filth out of her mouth, sick to her stomach of having to obey King Vurugu's orders. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of killing her; that would be more degrading than having to clip his ugly yellow toenails. Still, death seemed like it would be a blessed release right now...

The female examined her own talons for a moment, pondering on how much easier it would be for her to take her own life.

That wouldn't be so embarrassing. She would much rather do it herself than give King Vurugu the honour. It was tempting, she had to admit...

Hekima closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at her talons anymore, discarding the possibility in seconds.

No, she told herself. You won't be selfish. You have to get back to Maalum... He needs you.

"Oh, this is such a lovely marriage, Hekima," King Vurugu told her, lying happily on his back on a rock at the back of the cave. "It's like I don't have to lift a talon while you do everything for me."

"That's *exactly* what it's like," Hekima snapped. "You're a fat, lazy slob."

King Vurugu growled. "Don't test me, Hekima," he warned. "I'm not fat, as you can see by my magnificent wingspan." He spread his wings for added emphasis.

"I can *smell* that, too," said Hekima disdainfully. "You foul creature."

"You'd better not continue to insult me, Hekima," King Vurugu said nastily, "or you'll find these lovely talons of mine rammed down your throat again sooner than you think..."

Hekima stared down at the ground, defeated. No matter what, King Vurugu had her completely under his control. She wouldn't be able to escape; he was watching her all of the time.

The disgusting eagle rose to his feet, walking towards his enslaved mate. He grabbed her roughly, forcing her to stare into his eyes.

"Now, come on, Hekima," he said in a soft tone. It made her shiver with dread. "We're supposed to be in love. It hurts my feelings when you insult me."

He nuzzled the side of her neck, taking in her pleasant scent; it

was a stark contrast from his own potent odour. "Why don't we settle down and engage in a more... romantic activity? That will take your mind off of things, won't it?" He chuckled sinisterly.

Tears were streaming thick and fast down Hekima's cheeks as King Vurugu led her away...

AN: King Vurugu makes me vomit... He just has that quality. I award him the distinction of being my most disgusting character ever. Poor Hekima... She's well and truly screwed at the moment. But can Maalum help her? It looks like he's going to need Kipanya's help, though...

AN: I've got a nice 2,000-word chapter for you this time – and there's no disgusting antics from King Vurugu here, either. I can hear you saying, "Thank God for that!" already. The less we see of that slime, the better.

Chapter Fifteen: Teaming Up

"We have to go," Maalum urged, staring into his best friend's eyes. If anyone could help him, then it was Kipanya. In fact, the great golden eagle was convinced that he was the *only* one who could help him. "Please, Kipanya. You're the only one I can turn to."

"Maalum, this is just too much," Kipanya replied, turning away from him. "Maybe you should just... forget about it."

"*Forget about it?*" exclaimed Maalum, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Kipanya, I can't just forget about my father being murdered and my mother being kidnapped. It's this or nothing."

"Why?" Kipanya asked, whipping round to face him. "You're a big guy, Maalum. No one around here is gonna go toe to toe with you. I mean, if you stayed, you wouldn't just be a predator – you'd be *thepredator*!"

"I can't do it, Kipanya," Maalum said, shaking his head. He walked away from the cub, looking over his shoulder. "If you're

not going to help me, then fine. I'll go by myself. One way or another, I'm going to do this."

"Maalum... you can't just do this," Kipanya protested. "It's just so... sausage-y! You don't fight – you're gonna be eviscerated!"

"I'll figure something out," Maalum said. "The only way I'm coming back here is with my mother. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is." He stared down at the ground for a few moments, swallowing hard and convincing himself that he was doing the right thing. "Goodbye, Kipanya."

With that, the great golden eagle walked away from his friend's home – possibly for ever. He kept his eyes on the ground underneath his feet as he left, confident that he was going to do what he said while also doubting that he could do it without Kipanya. It was going to be a very lonely journey, that was for sure...

"Maalum, wait!"

Maalum looked, surprised, as Kipanya bounded after him. It looked as though he was fighting his own brain to join him; the cub was clearly still filled with a lot of doubt. He was a logical thinker, Maalum could sense.

"Why the hell am I doing this?"

The great golden eagle blinked as the thought suddenly entered his mind. It wasn't his own. In fact, the voice sounded awfully like Kipanya's...

Huh? Maalum narrowed his eyes in confusion. *What the—*

"It's 'cause he's your friend."

It took Maalum a few moments to realise that it *was* Kipanya's voice.

He was hearing his thoughts.

"Wait up, ya sausage," Kipanya said, stopping at Maalum's feet.

"You give up way too easily, you know that?"

"I thought you weren't going to help me?" Maalum said, trying to shake off the fact that he had been hearing his best friend's thoughts only a few moments before. He hoped that his brain wasn't damaged... Hearing voices in your head was rarely a mark of sanity. "You said I'd get eviscerated."

"On your own – probably," said Kipanya. "But if it means all that much to you, then I guess I could go on a little adventure with you."

"Seriously?" Maalum's eyes lit up with happiness. "You'll help me find King Vurugu?"

"Sure," Kipanya said with a shrug. "It's better than school. And I ain't staying here without no one to talk to."

"Then let's go," Maalum said. "Only..." He looked around, slightly lost. "Where do we start, exactly?"

"I don't know the way," Kipanya confessed, much to Maalum's surprise.

"You don't know the way?" Maalum said. "But you're supposed to be—"

The great golden eagle's head suddenly started buzzing. He recoiled in pain, slapping a wing against his forehead. "Ow!"

"Whoa," said Kipanya, staring up at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Maalum said, knowing now that Kipanya didn't know the way. It was as if he could sense what Kipanya did know and what he didn't. Just what was going on with his brain? It was enabling him to do things that he didn't think it could... How strange. "Don't worry about it."

"Vurugu's kingdom is a long way away," Kipanya explained, "so we're gonna have to find someone smart who knows the jungle."

"Someone smart?" said Maalum, thinking things over. "Well... do you know anyone who might be able to help?"

"Well—"

"No," Maalum interrupted, having read his thoughts without wanting to. "No, you don't."

"Okay," said Kipanya, looking slightly freaked out. "I live on my own; I'm not exactly the interactive type. If you want to find him, then you'll have to find someone smart enough who knows where his kingdom is."

"Let me think..." Maalum racked his brains. Usually, he would have asked his parents about such a thing – but they were history now. He would have to rely on his own knowledge from now on. "I think I might know someone."

"Who?"

"Tajiri!" Maalum bellowed at the top of his voice. The great golden eagle's words echoed through the jungle. Most animals were asleep by this point, so he wouldn't have been surprised if he was disturbing them with his loud tone. "Tajiri!"

"Tajiri?" Kipanya glowered at his friend in disbelief as they walked through the jungle. "The chick from school? She's a sausage!"

"She's very smart," Maalum retorted. "And you said that someone smart would know the way to Vurugu's kingdom."

"I meant someone *wise*, like a hermit, or another lion, or..." Kipanya let out a long sigh. "You're crazy, kid. First you start wanting to battle kings, then you start fraternising with sausages. What's next? Taking over the jungle?"

"Trust me," Maalum said. "She'll know."

"She'd better," Kipanya replied, "'cause I ain't going on a wild sausage chase all night."

"Don't worry," said Maalum. "I have everything under control." He continued yelling, even louder this time. "*Tajiri!*"

"Maalum?"

Her voice sounded faint, since it was coming from up above. Maalum stared straight up at a tall tree in front of him. He could make out a dark silhouette perched on one of the branches, barely illuminated by the pale moonlight. The great golden eagle could tell that it was Tajiri, though.

"Tajiri!" Maalum spread his wings and flew up to the branch where Tajiri was, arriving there within seconds. "Tajiri, I need your help."

Tajiri sleepily rubbed her eyes with a wing. "Maalum, what is it?" she asked. "I've been sleeping."

"Sorry," Maalum said. "But this is kind of urgent."

"Why?" Tajiri said. "Was it worth waking me up? Then again, I suppose seeing your cute face makes up for—"

"My dad's dead and my mom's been kidnapped," Maalum interrupted.

"What?" Tajiri's expression instantly changed to one of sympathy. "Oh, Maalum, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Maalum said, waving it off like it was nothing. "But I can fix things. I just need your help."

"Well... how?" Tajiri asked. "I don't really see how I can—"

"Do you know about an eagle called King Vurugu?" Maalum said.

The great golden eagle could have sworn he heard Tajiri growl at the mention of his name. Her eyes narrowed in anger. Her grip on the branch seemed to tighten. "*Vurugu.*"

"So you know him?" Maalum had a feeling that she did; however, he didn't expect such a furious reaction...

"He killed my parents," Tajiri revealed.

Maalum's eyes widened. "*What?*" He wondered whether he was just hearing things or not. After all, his brain didn't seem like that of any normal animal. "But... but your parents are... they're alive, aren't they?"

Tajiri trembled with fury. "I... I'm afraid I haven't been very honest with you, Maalum," she confessed, prompting the great golden eagle to look on with curiosity. "I may have... *lied* to you."

"Your parents... they're dead, aren't they?" Maalum asked, prompting a quiet, solemn nod from his mate-to-be. "I'm sorry."

Losing one parent was enough, but Tajiri had lost *both* of hers. That had to be the worst thing that could happen to a young bird in the jungle.

"It's okay," Tajiri said. "I didn't think you'd be bothered to hear about it, so I didn't say. It was easier just to... pretend they were there – even if it only lasted for a little while."

"What happened?" said Maalum, feeling ever so sorry for Tajiri. "I mean, why did he kill them?"

"I don't know," Tajiri said. "I wasn't old enough to understand; I had barely hatched when it happened. I just remember his eyes, and those... those *talons*."

"Talons?" said Maalum.

"His talons..." Tajiri shook her head, the memory burned into her mind. "They were... they were *yellow*."

"Yellow?" Maalum pulled a face; he dreaded to think how a bird's talons could decay enough to turn that sort of colour. They would have had to be very unhygienic for that to happen. Although King Vurugu didn't sound like the type of bird who cared about how clean he was.

"Yes. Yellow," Tajiri said. "It was horrible. He let me go, though. Probably to make me suffer. Other than that, all I remember is the name."

"So you've just been living here all on your own ever since?" Maalum asked.

"Yes," Tajiri replied, nodding. "I left home after they died and never looked back since. I just tried to lead a normal life after that, by going to school and stuff... I'm probably a little older than I look."

"And still just as beautiful," Maalum complimented, causing Tajiri to smile slightly. He shook his head. "Anyway, he's got my mother, so... I want to know where Vurugu's kingdom is. I have to get her back."

"Your mother?" said Tajiri.

"Yeah," Maalum said. "I don't know who he is, but I bet he's torturing her senseless right now. I have to rescue her before it's too late."

"I know where his kingdom is," Tajiri told him. "I'll tell you the way – as long as I get to go with you."

"You... you wanna go with me?" Maalum said, unable to hide the smile on his face. "I don't mind that. I don't mind that at all!"

"I wasn't able to save my parents," Tajiri said, "but maybe I can help you save your mother. She doesn't deserve this. No one does."

"This means a lot to me, Tajiri," Maalum said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't have to," Tajiri replied, nuzzling him on his enormous chest. "We're in this together."

Maalum nuzzled her back, having to bend down to reach her head. Despite the incredible difference in size, they both adored each other. No wonder Tajiri found his enormity special... For

such a lonely creature, she had to choose her friends wisely.

"Are you two love-sausages finished up there?" Kipanya called from below. "We've got work to do!"

Tajiri looked down. "Who's that?"

"Oh, that's Kipanya," Maalum told her. "He's my friend."

"You made friends with the school troublemaker?" Tajiri said, staring at him in surprise. "I didn't expect that from you."

"He's not as bad as he looks," Maalum said, sticking up for his friend. "Seriously. He's a lot better than Maana or Kulevya. At least he doesn't think I'm a freak."

"Well, I trust you," Tajiri said. "Let's just hope you're right."

The two golden eagles fluttered down from the tree, landing in front of Kipanya. "You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend."

"It, um... slipped my mind," Maalum said, glancing awkwardly at the cub. He indicated Tajiri with a gesture of his wing. "This is Tajiri."

"Yeah – I know who you are," Kipanya said, surveying her cautiously. "You're that sausage from school."

"'Sausage'?" said Tajiri, confused.

"He says that a lot," Maalum said. "I think it's his favourite word."

"I see," Tajiri replied. "Well, Mr Sausage, I'm the one with the know-how here, so I think you'd better start listening and stop acting like you're going to claw me across the face."

"I don't hit girls," Kipanya said, somewhat offended by her comment.

"Good," Tajiri said. "Then we won't be such a bad team after all."

A great team, Maalum thought, looking from Kipanya to

Tajiri. *The best I could have.*

AN: So it looks like Maalum, Kipanya and Tajiri will be forming an unlikely trio in order to find King Vurugu and rescue Hekima! Sounds simple, doesn't it? But when has anything in my stories every gone smoothly? There's a long journey ahead...

AN: Last time, yet another memorable trio was formed, and King Vurugu was nowhere to be seen. Sadly, I can't say the same for this chapter. I apologise in advance for any sickening scenes that may follow.

Chapter Sixteen: On the Move

"This'll take us a lot of places," Tajiri said as she took charge of the group, walking down a steep path that cut through the trees. "We have a long journey ahead of us, and we'll have to work together if we want to make it."

"Who put you in charge, girly?" asked Kipanya, not exactly taking a proper liking to the female golden eagle. As far as sausages went, she was the most sausage-y he'd come across. If anything, *heshould* be in charge of the group. He was the most adventurous cub who ever lived – or at least he *thought* he was. "We didn't vote on it."

"I put me in charge," Tajiri snapped over her shoulder. She didn't really like Kipanya either. She was far too accustomed to his role as the school troublemaker to become friends with him at this point. He had some serious growing up to do, in her opinion. "Is it so much of a problem?"

"Oh, please, guys – don't start arguing," Maalum pleaded, feeling like he was caught between a rock and a hard place. Kipanya was his best friend and Tajiri was his mate-to be – and they weren't getting along at all! This was an unprecedented disaster! Hopefully, he could get them to cooperate more over the course of the journey, otherwise this was going to be an absolute nightmare. "We're supposed to be a team, right?"

"Well, why'd you have to bring your girlfriend, then?" Kipanya moaned. "We could have done this by ourselves. A dynamic duo! Not a terrible trio."

"You *did* say that we'd have to find someone with decent navigational skills," Maalum reminded him. If anything, it was Kipanya's fault in the first place for suggesting it. "And Tajiri is the smartest creature I know."

"But she's one of the popular girls!" Kipanya exclaimed, continuing to protest. "Most of them are spineless, brainless cowards who couldn't defend themselves from a rabid caterpillar!"

"I think you'll find that I am neither spineless nor brainless," Tajiri said, giving the cub a disapproving glare. "In fact, we'd probably be much further ahead if you weren't here."

"Oh, yeah?" challenged Kipanya. "And what makes me such a hindrance, huh?"

"The fact that golden eagles – such as Maalum and I – are aviary creatures," Tajiri explained, "so we much prefer to fly rather than walk. And when we're walking, we're much slower than when we're flying. So, in short: you *are* a hindrance."

"Why, you little—" Kipanya lunged forward, only to be batted back by one of Maalum's enormous wings. "Oh, come on, Maalum – let me get her!" He struggled and strained to try and get past the great golden eagle, to no avail.

"No way, Kipanya," Maalum said, holding him back with ease. His impressive strength – which he didn't think about often – was certainly helping here. Kipanya was a slippery little fella, that was for sure! "I'm not gonna let you hurt her."

"Aw, just a little dismemberment," Kipanya said. "I'll make it quick."

"I think he's deranged," Tajiri said, stopping to stare at the cub. "Are you going to act this psychopathic throughout the whole

journey?"

"I'll be as psychopathic as I want!" Kipanya yelled, before finally deciding to calm down and give up on assaulting Tajiri. It was pretty obvious that he wouldn't stand a chance of inflicting pain upon her. He was the type of cub who liked to pout and shout until he lost all energy, however. "Where the heck are we going, anyway?"

"I could ask the same question," said Maalum, finally agreeing on something that Kipanya had said for once. "Where exactly is our, um... first stop, Tajiri?"

"Well, Kulevya's home isn't too far up ahead," Tajiri said, prompting more looks of disgust from Kipanya. "I use that as a marker to signal where the Town ends and the Beyond begins."

"Uh... sorry," said Maalum, raising a wing as if he were asking Maarifa a question in class. "What's the 'Town' and what's the 'Beyond'?"

"Sounds like a true sausage-fest to me," remarked Kipanya. "I bet this chick doesn't even know where she is right now!"

"I'm far from a chick, Mr Sausage," Tajiri snapped. "I'm far older than you, and I have much more experience." She looked at Maalum. "And in response to your question, Maalum, the Town is my made-up name for this section of the jungle. It's highly populated, there's a school, a regular water supply, blah-blah-blah."

"'Blah-blah-blah', eh?" said Kipanya, raising an eyebrow. "That a technical term, teacher's pet?"

"Shut up," said Tajiri bluntly. "Anyway, the Beyond, as I like to call it, is a long and wild area of land that has little to no regulation. In fact, it's the place where you're most likely to die if you're a prey."

"Ha!" snorted Kipanya. "The animals had better watch out when I'm around, then!" He had quite a smug look on his face.

"Let's just hope another golden eagle doesn't snap you up in its talons, Kipanya," Tajiri said with a sly smile, knocking his smugness right into space. "The rabid ones have been particularly known for that..."

"Well, I... err..." Kipanya fumbled around nervously. "Maybe we'd better be extra careful around there. Maybe keep the hunting to nicer areas, you know?"

Maalum could hear Tajiri chuckling to herself at her little lie. She had obviously found a way to keep Kipanya quiet, as evident by the small wink that she gave Maalum.

"You'd better listen to me more, then," Tajiri said. "I know how wild the jungle can get sometimes."

"Err... right," said Kipanya, feeling very awkward all of a sudden. "Sure."

Truth be told, the great golden eagle was pleased. Anything that would stop the two from arguing even more was more than welcome. All he wanted was a little cooperation. It was the only way they would be able to rescue his mother from King Vurugu.

"So we have to cross the Beyond to get to King Vurugu?" Maalum asked.

Tajiri nodded. "Yep," she said. "Once you get past the Beyond, that's where Vurugu's kingdom is."

"Good," said Maalum.

"Not really," said Tajiri. "Some say it's hell on earth."

"Some say my kingdom is hell on earth," King Vurugu said with a malevolent smile. "Personally, I like to think of it as paradise. How about you, dear?"

"Well, I'm aching all over, I haven't had a bath in days, and my mouth tastes like feet," replied Hekima with the most miserable of frowns. She was curled up in the corner of the cave, attached

to a heavy boulder with a vine tied around her ankle so she couldn't escape. There was no chance of that with King Vurugu. "I've never felt more alone in my entire life. I'm about as far away from paradise as I can get."

"That's the spirit," King Vurugu chuckled, happy that she was severely depressed. He liked seeing other animals suffer. It was one of the few things in life that gave him pleasure these days. He had the power, and he was going to enforce it on everyone he could. It almost felt... godlike. "You should've thought about that before leaving my kingdom with that little rat Afya."

"He's not the rat," Hekima spat, tears streaking her cheeks. "You are!"

King Vurugu gasped, placing a wing against his chest and affecting a look of mock offence. "Oh, Hekima, you've hurt my feelings," he said. "I'm much more than just a vile, foul-smelling rodent."

"You are?" said Hekima faintly, barely paying any attention to him. She often became entranced by her own thoughts ever since being kidnapped by the evil eagle; it was the only way she wouldn't go insane.

"Yes," said King Vurugu. "I'm a vile, foul-smelling rodent who will kill you if you don't stop insulting me."

"Just like you killed my mate," Hekima muttered. She missed Afya so much. And Maalum, too. The thought that she once had a family of her own – even if it was just for a little bit – felt like a distant memory now. A dream, even. It hardly felt real to her anymore.

And that broke her heart.

"That's right," King Vurugu snarled. "That poor wretch got what was coming to him, and you will too if you continue to drive a wedge between our relationship."

"We have no relationship," Hekima mumbled, ever so interested

in a tiny little stone on the ground. It had far more moral qualities than King Vurugu, and would make for a much more interesting husband. "I'm your slave."

"*'Slave'* is such a strong word," said King Vurugu. "I prefer the term 'servant'."

"Same thing, stupid," Hekima retorted.

The evil king growled, grabbing Hekima by the neck with his slimy yellow talons. The female golden eagle could only gag in disgust; she hated having to look at them, let alone feel them against her skin.

"You just don't listen, do you?" said King Vurugu, speaking in a quiet tone, even though Hekima knew he was furious. "What do I have to do, Hekima? What do I have to do to make you listen? To make you love me for the kind, generous soul that I am? I spared you, after all. I let you live. Isn't that enough?"

Hekima said nothing. She just stared at him. A broken soul.

King Vurugu rolled his eyes, dropping her to the ground. "Fine," he said. "If that's the way you want to play it. Maybe a few more loving foot massages will help you to learn..."

AN: There are a number of strong swear words that I could use to describe King Vurugu, but I'm above that. I'll just call him a meanie instead. The vileness is stifling, isn't it? However, the antics of Maalum, Kipanya and Tajiri are somewhat entertaining. But they might find themselves in danger soon enough...

AN: Here we are with another chapter of adventurous cubs and ugly golden eagles with yellow talons. The joys of being a fanfic writer, eh? Still, this chapter sets up something quite important, so all eyes on the story!

Chapter Seventeen: King Vurugu's Idea

"There once was a great big bird

And everything she said was absurd

Then I yelled, 'Good grief! She's a menace to the shores!'

So I tore off her head with my claws!"

Kipanya chuckled with glee upon finishing his little song. Tajiri didn't look very impressed, however. In fact, she was giving him a stare so fiery that Maalum feared it would burn the cub's soul in two.

"Ha-hardy-ha," said Tajiri, folding her wings. "You should be an entertainer with humour like that, Kipanya."

"Thanks, chick," said Kipanya, trotting past the golden eagle with a look of triumph on his face. *"I like it!"*

The female golden eagle raised an eyebrow at her giant counterpart. "Are you still sure about bringing him along with you, Maalum?"

"I will admit that he's—"

"Utterly horrible."

"—difficult," said Maalum, "but, in all honesty, if you treated him with a little more respect, I think he'd lighten up a bit."

"He doesn't treat me with respect," Tajiri said, glancing at the cub. Kipanya was clawing frantically at tree, pretending that it was some kind of great beast he was fighting. "He seems incapable of it, in fact."

"He can fight, though," Maalum said, watching him. He did seem to be able with his claws. Very much so, in fact.

"Yes – he's absolutely marvellous at fighting imaginary tree monsters," said Tajiri, "but that's hardly going to matter when he comes up against King Vurugu."

"Is King Vurugu known for being extremely violent?" Maalum inquired.

"Well, he killed my parents, your father, and imprisoned your mother, so I would say yes," replied Tajiri. "For all we know, he could have the strength of ten thousand eagles!"

"Oh, blah, blah, blah," said Kipanya, padding back over to the two eagles. "Ten thousand eagles are like an ant for me. I'll take on this Vurugu and rip out his talons one at a time."

"I don't think you'd want to go near his talons at all," Tajiri responded. "With my intelligence, we'll have to develop an effective plan that will ensure the defeat of Vurugu and the rescue of Maalum's dear mother."

"All I hear when you speak is this annoying beeping sound," Kipanya told her. "Maybe if we glued your beak shut then you would be more useful to us."

"You little runt!"

Tajiri leapt at Kipanya, her talons a blur, only to be held back by Maalum's mighty grip. "Hold it, Tajiri," he warned. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Come on, Maalum!" Tajiri protested, failing to notice the irony of the situation. Kipanya had been in a similar position previously... "He's a menace!"

"Stop struggling, Tajiri," Maalum urged. "Please. I don't want to crush you with my pinky toe."

"Do it, Maalum," Kipanya teased. "She'll look better as a splat on the ground."

"You're on thin ice, pal!" said Tajiri.

"Oh, good – maybe I'll fall through the ice so I don't have to look at you."

The female golden eagle looked ready to burst by this point. Maalum wasn't letting go of her. She didn't want her to hurt Kipanya – or herself, for that matter. Cooperation between the three of them was obviously way too much to ask for. There

was an enormous personality clash here, and it didn't look as though that was going to change.

Tajiri's resistance finally seemed to die down, and Maalum released her, lowering her gently to the ground. The female golden eagle was always so touched by how tender he was with other creatures; it seemed like he didn't have a bad bone in his body. No wonder he was never violent.

She didn't bother to try and attack Kipanya again. It was pointless, anyway. She didn't want to damage her relationship with Maalum. Her anger had just gotten the better of her for a moment.

"Okay," Tajiri said, raising both wings. "Let's just forget about the senseless arguing for a moment and try to focus here. Now, judging by what I can see, we're on the border of the Beyond right now. After this, it's a long trek to Vurugu's kingdom."

"So what do we do when we arrive at the kingdom?" Maalum asked. He hadn't really thought that far ahead; the general idea he had in his mind was that he would rescue his mother and fly away as fast as possible. Not the most detailed plan, he had to admit. But Tajiri was smart – smarter than any other animal he'd come across – so he knew she would be able to work something brilliant out.

"We'll work it out when we get there," Tajiri said. "I'll need to survey the surroundings first."

"Or we could just go in there and rip his heart out," Kipanya said. "Then I will burn his body and throw the ashes into a river! Ha-ha-ha! *I like it!*"

"The state of your mental health seriously concerns me," Tajiri said, shaking her head. "If we're careful, we might not even have to face Vurugu at all – and that's a definite option in my eyes."

"Mine, too," Maalum agreed, although Kipanya looked somewhat disappointed. The great golden eagle knew the cub

wanted to prove he was up to the task of combatting great foes. King Vurugu would be a more than suitable enemy for that. "But if we do need to fight him, then I know Kipanya's got our backs."

He'd said that last part to try and lift Kipanya's spirits. It looked like it worked; there was a small smile in the corner of the cub's mouth.

"Oh, that's great," said Tajiri flatly. "I am now filled with confidence."

"Don't worry," said Kipanya. "I'll protect you – but if you *do* somehow get injured beyond help, then I'll be all too happy to deliver a mercy killing."

"I hate you," Tajiri said.

Kipanya smiled. "I know."

"Come on," sighed Maalum, continuing into the bowels of the jungle. "We'd better keep moving. The faster we walk, the quicker we get there."

"I still wish we could fly," Tajiri complained.

"Well, too bad," said Kipanya, "because I'm not going any—" He was interrupted when he bumped right into Maalum, who had stopped. "Hey!"

Maalum turned around, a smile on his beak. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "We should fly!"

Kipanya narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Well, I'm not going to sprout wings anytime soon, so I don't—"

"Don't worry," Maalum interrupted. "I've got it all worked out! Kipanya, would you mind grabbing hold of my feet?"

"Excuse me?"

Grabbing hold of a pointy stone with her talons, Hekima

miserably scraped a vertical line into the rock wall, marking off another day she'd spent in King Vurugu's grim, unpleasant-smelling company.

"Misery, misery, misery," she said. "That's me all over."

The golden eagle licked the rock wall. Despite the unpleasant feeling, it was the only way she could wash out the horrible taste of King Vurugu's talons. That was one meal that no one wanted to savour.

She wondered if she would ever escape this dismal place. Probably not. The only chance of *that* ever happening was if King Vurugu suddenly upped and died. Despite his disregard for any form of personal hygiene, it didn't seem like that was going to happen anytime soon. Even when you took into account that his body was absolutely infested with bacteria, he seemed invincible. It was amazing, in a repulsive sort of way.

My mate is dead, my son is probably dead, she thought sadly, *and soon I'll be dead, too.*

"Oh, Hekima," said a voice that nobody wanted to be familiar with. "You look so miserable."

"Did my utterance of the word 'misery' give it away?" retorted Hekima, expecting to be met with a slap across the face.

It didn't come, though, much to her surprise.

"Heh-heh-heh," chuckled King Vurugu, leaning in the opening to her little prison cell. "That's the Hekima sense of humour I know and love. You're pretty cute when you're angry."

"Go away," Hekima moped. "If you're here to taunt me, then—"

"Wait. You misunderstand me," said King Vurugu. He then affected an apologetic expression. "Hekima, I have to admit, in the past few days, I've been a little bit... stand-offish, shall we say – which in this case is a *big*, big word meaning—"

"Pure evil?"

"—tough, but fair." King Vurugu smiled, in his usual repulsive manner. "However, I know *exactly* what will repair the rift in our happy marriage."

"And what would that be?" asked Hekima, feigning interest. *Probably another session of me clipping his foul toenails*, she thought. *'Cause I just love that kind of salty taste lingering in my mouth.*

"We will have a wedding ceremony!" King Vurugu announced, as if it were the most amazing thing in the world. "You know, we never did get married... *officially*, so I feel that it is our civic duty to do so."

"I see," said Hekima. "So your plan is to make hundreds of animals watch as I sell my life to you in the most humiliating way imaginable in order to make me feel better?"

"That's the idea!" laughed King Vurugu. "Aren't I just the most romantic animal on earth?"

"No."

"Don't worry, Hekima," King Vurugu said, tugging on the vine that secured the female golden eagle to a large boulder. "Once we're legally married, maybe you'll learn to accept me more, and then we finally might be able to find you somewhere more comfortable to sleep. Perhaps next to me."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll just kill you."

"Thank you. Goodnight."

AN: So, the evil King Vurugu has decided to organise a wedding ceremony for him and Hekima. The fiend! The poor bird is just being perpetually tortured. Will the nightmare ever end? Can Tajiri and Kipanya get along? Do I deserve a sandwich for writing this? We may never know.

AN: This is a pleasantly long update... until you reach the end – but try not to think about horrible characters like King Vurugu. I suppose it's inevitable, though... I mean, now that I've mentioned his name, your mind is already thinking about him and— *Gah!* Never mind. Just read it.

Chapter Eighteen: The Announcement

The journey, while long, was relatively uneventful for the three animals. In fact, Maalum would have treated the experience like a pleasant walk – or flight – if it wasn't for the endless bickering between Tajiri and Kipanya. He would use the expression "there were arguing like an old married couple", but the chances of those two getting married were one in a billion zillions. It was about as likely as a lioness marrying a hornbill.

"You suck... you suck... you suck..." Kipanya was singing yet another of his insulting songs in order to irritate Tajiri. Needless to say, they were getting increasingly uncreative with each one. "You suck... you suck... you suck..."

"Am I allowed to kill him yet?" Tajiri asked, gliding alongside Maalum in the air. The great golden eagle was so big now – and kept growing as they continued on their journey – that he was able to carry Kipanya in his enormous talons, allowing them to get to Vurugu's kingdom much quicker by flying. "One quick slash to the throat. It'll be painless. I promise."

"Don't think you get special rights just because you're Maalum's girlfriend," snapped Kipanya. "After all, I am the first lion to fly. If you killed me, then you'd be a disgrace to the historical community."

"Somehow, I think the jungle would be a lot happier without someone like you," Tajiri muttered under her breath. Throughout the journey, she had been rendered unable to get along with the cub in a friendly manner. It had dissolved into a bitter rivalry. *Maybe his arrogance will be the end of him when he meets King Vurugu...*

"Six days," Maalum complained, his talons clenching slightly in frustration, digging uncomfortably into Kipanya's stomach. "Six days, and you *still* can't stop fighting. I think my head's going to explode..."

"Hey!" Kipanya exclaimed. "Do you mind not poking your toes into my stomach?"

"Sorry," Maalum apologised, loosening his grip slightly. He was hoping that they could become a great team; sadly, though, that didn't seem to be the case. He was doomed to like both of them, even though they could never like each other. Just his luck. "It's just a little... stressing, that's all."

"Consider yourself lucky that we're almost there, then," said Tajiri, surveying the ground below her. "The ground is getting... dirtier. We must be on the outskirts of the kingdom."

"The ground is made of dirt," said Kipanya. "It's *a/ways* dirty!"

"It's *double* the dirt," Tajiri informed him, confident in her knowledge of the jungle and its various different areas. She was very smart, and wasn't in the mood for allowing Kipanya to make a fool out of her. "King Vurugu likes it that way. To him, covering the earth with more soil is good decoration."

"It just seems sausage-y to me," Kipanya grumbled, using his trademark adjective which Tajiri didn't think she could decipher in a million years. Yes, he was a strange cub, that Kipanya. Whatever his story was, it had to be utterly demented. No one this crazy came from a normal background.

"Sausage-y," Tajiri repeated. "Sausage-y. Everything's sausage-y to you."

"You finally get it," retorted Kipanya. "*I like it!*" He let loose with a loud, eagle-like screech, which managed to send a few birds scattering out of the trees below.

Those three words were something that he liked to repeat endlessly as well. It was his catchphrase, practically. And ever

since Maalum had insisted on carrying Kipanya in the air so they could fly to Vurugu's kingdom, he had picked up on his screech. Tajiri found it utterly baffling. He was a lion, not a bird! They didn't screech! They roared!

Tajiri shook her head in bewilderment. Kipanya: as crazy as they came.

"We'd better land," Maalum said, spotting a clearing down below that looked pleasant enough; it didn't seem to be ravaged with the extra dirt that King Vurugu insisted on covering the earth with. "I think we could use a break."

"Fine by me," Tajiri shrugged, angling downwards for a landing. She reached the ground within seconds, her talons shooting out and grabbing the low branch of a tree. Maalum followed in her wake, opting to drop right to the ground, lowering Kipanya with him. Good thing he was so huge, otherwise he never would have been able to carry the cub. "So... looks like this it, then."

"You girls can rest here if you want," Kipanya remarked, stretching his legs before trotting off into the jungle. "I'm going after King Vurugu."

"No," Maalum said sternly, holding Kipanya back with a wing. The cub never seemed to put up much of a fight; this was most likely because he knew that Maalum could stop him with ease, and it wasn't in his best interests to rebel against him. Nobody knew what the great golden eagle could really be capable of... "We have to stick together, Kipanya."

"Stick together," said Kipanya, backing away against a tree. "Right. So, me, you and the Nerd Bird are gonna work as a team to stop King Vurugu. Boy, that's gonna go down like a storm."

Maalum winced inwardly upon hearing the insult "Nerd Bird". Back when his parents were still alive, that was Afya's favourite nickname for Hekima. He meant it in a loving way, of course. Still, now it only served as a painful reminder of what had

become of Maalum's family.

"Look, Kipanya," Maalum began gently, "I know you don't like Tajiri, but—"

"Save it, sausage," the cub interrupted, waving a paw in the air as a signal for him to stop. "I get it. Fine. I'll help you rescue your mom, and I won't argue with Mrs I-Know-Everything anymore. Okay?"

"Really?" Maalum looked surprised.

"Yeah," said Kipanya. "As long as, once we're done with this little adventure, our paths will never cross again, and we will go on being best friends without her interfering with our relationship. Got it?"

"Um... I think we can work something out," Maalum replied after a moment of thought. "I was going to invite you to our wedding, but—"

"Excluding special occasions, then," Kipanya amended. "Trust me – the less I see of the chick, the better." He fanned himself with a paw. "Phew – is it sausage-y in here, or is it just me? I think I'd better go for a walk." He started to depart again.

"Kipanya," Maalum called.

"Don't worry," Kipanya replied over his shoulder. "I'm not gonna go anywhere. I'm just taking a little stroll, that's all. I'll be back later."

"Stick to the outskirts," Maalum warned. "We don't want anyone spotting us."

"I know, I know!" said Kipanya. "See ya round."

He disappeared into the trees. The great golden eagle watched him go, before turning to Tajiri, who was sat at the base of a tree.

"I know what you're thinking," Maalum said as he walked over

to her, leaving giant footprints in the soft earth that would baffle even the most intelligent of animals. "'He's really annoying, and I hope he gets eaten by a bear or something on the way back.' But you have to understand that—"

"Wait a minute," said Tajiri, lifting her head to stare up at Kipanya in amazement. "That's *exactly* what I was thinking. How did you—"

"—know what I was going to say?"

"But how—"

"—can you say what I was going to say before you say it?"

"Are you—"

"—for real, or are you just messing with me?"

The two golden eagles stared at each other for a moment, both quite surprised by their magical – if somewhat brief – conversation together.

"Sorry," Maalum said, slapping both wings against his face in annoyance. "I'm trying to keep this under control, but it just slips out sometimes."

"Huh?" Tajiri narrowed her eyes, confused. "Maalum, what are you talking about?"

The great golden eagle sighed, slumping against a nearby tree. "Um... I think there's something a little wrong with my head," he explained with a nervous chuckle. "You see, I can... kinda... sorta... read minds."

Tajiri stared at him for what felt like a long time. "You can... read minds?" she said slowly, trying to take it all in. Maalum knew how she felt. Cubs who liked to use the word "sausage" as an adjective and screech like eagles were one thing, but this was probably insane to her! "But... how?"

"It doesn't happen all the time," Maalum told her, "but...

sometimes, I get these little... glimmers. If I think really hard about it, then I know what animals are going to say, I can hear their thoughts, and it's like... it's like I'm them for a moment."

"You mean... you're psychic?" said Tajiri.

"Um... yeah," said Maalum. "I guess that's the word for it."

Tajiri blinked, surprised. "Gee, I knew the size was one thing, but you keep surprising me at every turn, Maalum," she said. "What else don't I know about you? Can you turn invisible on command, too?"

"I don't even want this power at all," Maalum said. "I mean, it's not as if reading minds is ever gonna be useful or anything."

Tajiri's eyes seemed to light up with delight when he said that. "Wait a minute..." Her beak dropped open, as she stared into Maalum's eyes. "That's it!"

Maalum didn't quite understand. "What?"

"Your psychic powers!" Tajiri exclaimed. "We can use them to fight King Vurugu!"

"We can?"

"Of course we can!" she said. "You can read the thoughts of King Vurugu. We'll know exactly what he's up to, and we can use it to find out his weaknesses."

"Then that means..." Maalum said, thinking this through, "that we can find out where my mom is, too!"

"Exactly!" said Tajiri. "Now *that's* a battle plan. Better than 'poking out his eyeballs with a stick' or whatever the hell Kipanya was talking about before."

"You're a genius, Tajiri!" Maalum told his mate-to-be admiringly. He never would have thought of this himself. She always seemed to know what the right thing to do was. No wonder he'd fallen for her...

"You're the one with the powers," she replied. "You just keep getting more and more original, Maalum. I like it!"

Maalum chuckled. "You sound like Kipanya."

"Good thing he's not here," Tajiri said, landing on the great golden eagle's stomach. "Now maybe we can have some... private time together."

The two golden eagles locked eyes, caught up in a romantic stare. Their smiles widened.

"Maalum and Tajiri, kissing in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G," sang Kipanya as he sauntered into the clearing, sending their amorous time into oblivion. "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes my claws to sever both your throats. Ha-ha! *I like it!*"

Tajiri sighed in disappointment, fluttering back down to the ground. Maalum smiled innocently at his best friend.

"Kipanya," he greeted him. "That was a quick walk."

"I got bored," Kipanya replied, munching on an apple that he seemed to have acquired from his brief little excursion. "You find some tasty food around here, though."

"I'm surprised it's not infected," Tajiri remarked. "It's amazing that food still even grows in this kingdom. Even the trees look half alive."

"What are we going to do about Vurugu, anyway?" Kipanya asked, taking another bite out of his apple. "I say we go for the throat first."

"Actually," said Tajiri, glancing up at Maalum, "we have a plan."

"Now, I'd like to thank each and every one of you for turning up today," King Vurugu said, stood on a small hilltop in the middle of a grassy field. "We've had such good attendance, and that has absolutely *nothing* to do with the fact that I threatened the

death penalty to anyone who didn't come."

All the other animals of King Vurugu's kingdom – most of which looked quite unclean – watched mindlessly as their ruler talked, quite obviously bored out of their minds already. It was amazing, considering they'd only been stood there for ten minutes.

Hekima shifted uncomfortably on her feet, feeling utterly embarrassed that King Vurugu was about to announce how they were to be married. It made her sick to her stomach – her very *soul* – that this was happening. How had everything gone so wrong?

Well... this is it, she thought bleakly. Time to watch as your whole life wastes before your very eyes.

"Now, the reason I've arranged this little get-together is because I have a special announcement," said King Vurugu, smiling in his usual unpleasant way. "My lovely girlfriend Hekima and I are to be married!"

Hekima heard some audible gasps from the audience. One lioness even remarked, "You poor thing," under her breath. A hornbill just laughed and laughed right at the back of the crowd, finding it hilarious. The female golden eagle dug her toes into the earth, closing her eyes and hoping that the voices would stop.

"I know you're all excited," King Vurugu said, "and we are, too! This is a happy occasion, after all. The culmination of two weeks of dating and romance and all that other mushy stuff that goes along with it. The good news is that everyone's invited, too! Isn't that just absolutely enthralling?"

"Yay," came the dull response from the crowd.

"I knew it!" exclaimed King Vurugu. "This special occasion will take place on tomorrow night! You'd better mess up those feathers and rot your fur, because it promises to be the wedding of the century!" He grinned evilly. "In fact, you could say it's

to *die* for..."

Now that was something that Hekima *did* hear.

"This is so wonderful, Hekima," King Vurugu said as they arrived back at his palace. "It fills my tiny heart with an uncountable amount of joy. It's just like my sixth wife all over again. You remember her, of course." He indicated a rotting skeleton that lay in the corner of the cave, before letting out a solemn sigh. "She died too young..."

Hopefully, I'll be next, Hekima prayed, sitting down on a rock with a miserable frown. By tomorrow night, she would have sold her life to the most evil, disgusting creature on earth. It made her want to kill herself. *Hopefully...*

"Still, I'm sure we'll be happily married for years to come!" King Vurugu said, beaming at his unwilling mate-to-be. "I hope you've remembered to give yourself a special makeover for the occasion."

"You haven't let me out of your sight once," Hekima said. "How on earth could I have a makeover?"

"Hmm..." King Vurugu stroked his chin with an ugly wing. "I suppose we'll have to get you a makeover, then. I've already had mine." He lifted one of his feet to reveal that they were both dripping with slimy mud. "*Extra* mud between the toes. I find it quite refreshing, actually."

"Oh, yes," Hekima agreed. "And so is me hanging myself."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hekima. I wouldn't let you do that," said King Vurugu, grabbing the golden eagle and wrapping her up in a tight hug. A malicious glint appeared in his eyes. "You are going to marry me, and there isn't one single thing that you – or anybody else, for that matter – can do about it."

Hekima's eyes filled with tears. "I know," she admitted. "I know..."

AN: Looks like we're reaching something of a climax. King Vurugu's wedding is fast approaching, with Maalum and his friends hot on his trail. But can they stop the wedding before it's too late, or will they become spare toenail clippers for the evil bird?

AN: It's time to hold on to your seats tightly, since this is where the story gets really tense, really fast!

Chapter Nineteen: The Occasion Nears

As night fell, a quaint atmosphere crept into the clearing. Maalum was surprised; if anything, he thought that Tajiri and Kipanya would still be squabbling with each other well past midnight. However, the female golden eagle was now fast asleep in Maalum's embrace, and Kipanya was sat a few feet away from him, staring at the flickering flames of a fire they had created earlier that evening to keep them warm.

Maalum decided to break the silence, since he and Kipanya hadn't really talked much since Tajiri had explained their plan of attack for when they entered King Vurugu's land. The cub had accepted the plan without putting up much of a fight. Maalum wasn't a fighter, so Kipanya was happy enough to deliver the killing blow if the situation called for it.

"Um... Kipanya?" said Maalum, immediately snapping Kipanya out of his thoughts.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"You, uh... look like you're thinking about something," the great golden eagle noted. "Any special reason?"

"Huh?" Kipanya blinked. "Oh, no – I was just thinking about... um, sausages."

"Come on," Maalum said, sniffing out the lie before it had even tumbled from the cub's mouth. Such were the extent of his powers. "Something must be troubling you."

"Nope," Kipanya lied. "Nothing at all."

"I think you're lying," said Maalum, deciding to try and focus his powers rather than shun them for once. Maybe then they wouldn't come to him so erratically. If he could control it, then that would prove to be much more effective. "In fact, I can probably tell what you're thinking right now."

"You gonna try your mind powers on me now?" Kipanya scoffed, rolling his eyes at the ludicrous nature of the prospect. "Good luck."

"You're thinking about..." Maalum closed his eyes, somewhat surprised at how quick Kipanya's thoughts were swimming through his mind. He didn't even have to make an effort; it was that impressive. "Your parents."

The great golden eagle had Kipanya's full attention by that point. "What?"

"Your parents," said Maalum. "You're... thinking about them."

"Hey – get out of my head!" Kipanya snarled. "I told ya that was secret! I don't wanna talk about it!"

"I'm sorry," Maalum said. "It's just that... well—"

"What?" the cub cut in.

"Well, maybe if you talked about it... you wouldn't feel so angry," Maalum offered, detecting that Kipanya's short temper was probably due to whatever had become of his parents. "I kinda... know how you feel, since both of my parents are... gone. My dad, anyway."

Deciding not to try and pry any further thoughts from Kipanya's mind with his powers, Maalum let the cub choose for himself whether to reveal any more about his past. He seemed uncertain about it.

"It's stupid, really," Kipanya said, opting to finally tell his friend. "Really, *really* stupid."

"Believe me, I don't think anything about you is stupid," Maalum said. "I'm the freak here, after all."

"Did *your* parents leave you to die because they were cruel monsters?" Kipanya asked, lifting his head up so he was staring into Maalum's eyes.

"Um... no."

"Well, mine *did*," Kipanya retorted, looking quite hurt. "They just left me there – and ever since I've had to fend for myself."

"Your parents abandoned you?" Maalum said, his eyes widening in surprise. He thought that maybe Kipanya's parents had died in a horrible accident, but he never would have imagined for a second that he had been abandoned. The great golden eagle couldn't picture what kind of horrible parents would do such a thing. Maybe King Vurugu's parents, but they weren't lions.

"Yeah," Kipanya said. "Don't ask me why. I was too young to know. All I remember is being left in a cold, dark cave... and that's it. I've been on my own for ever, practically. Until I met you, I didn't even have a friend. Those damn sausages called me crazy! You're the only one who... understands."

"No wonder you're always on your own," said Maalum thoughtfully. "Well, you have me as a friend. Always."

"That's something, I guess," Kipanya said. "Unless King Vurugu kills you tomorrow. In which case, I'm screwed."

"What if he kills *you*?" asked Maalum.

"*Ha!* You wish," said Kipanya confidently. "That sausage is gonna have his head shoved right up his butt if he tries to mess with me!"

"We can only hope... I guess," Maalum said, somewhat disturbed by Kipanya's choice of violent actions.

"Yep," Kipanya said, curling up into a sleeping position. "Anyway, I'm hitting the hay. Goodnight, sausage."

Maalum smiled. "Goodnight, Kipanya."

And soon all was silent.

Pandemonium had descended upon King Vurugu's palace the next evening, where animals were rushing all over the place, frantically trying to prepare for the wedding. Hekima, as usual, was tied up, watching a few other female eagles as they filed King Vurugu's yellow talons with some rocks.

"And I want those toenails to be *super* jagged!" King Vurugu said, frowning as he looked around the cave. "I've gotta look my best for this special occasion. And I hope you've given my lovely wife a mud bath, too!"

"Oh, yes, sir," said one of the eagles. "We did it this morning, in fact."

"I wish I'd drowned," Hekima mumbled. "After all, I thought it was bad luck to see me before the wedding... I should be dead by now."

"Don't dampen the mood, sweetie," said Vurugu, rising to his ugly feet as the eagles finished their work. "I even gave you toenail soup for breakfast! What more could a loving husband do for his mate?"

"Drop dead?" Hekima retorted.

"Pre-marriage nerves," King Vurugu whispered to the eagles. "I'm sure she'll perk up by the honeymoon."

"I thought we already had one," muttered Hekima, thinking of all the times she'd had her wings wrapped around Vurugu's greasy—

"This is official!" King Vurugu boomed, getting increasingly frustrated with her. "Don't ruin our big day before it's even started, honey."

"It's not like I'm going to fight back," Hekima said, truth laced

within her words. "You've already broken my spirit."

"Good," said King Vurugu. "The less you complain, the better. And the more happiness I get out of this joyous occasion."

"We'll just get to work on preparing the stage, Your Ugliness," one of the eagles said, before departing with the others with a respectful bow.

"Yes! All of you can go!" King Vurugu ordered. "I need to be alone for a minute with my blushing bride!"

The animals quickly scarpered from the palace, not wanting to anger King Vurugu any further. His fiancée was doing more than enough of that already. None of the kingdom's inhabitants were positive that this was going to be a marvellous marriage. More like a woeful wedding.

"Golly," said King Vurugu, slicing through the vine that attached Hekima to the rock with his talons and setting her free.

"You *are* a pretty miserable eagle, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" said Hekima, staring into King Vurugu's eyes. "After this... I have nothing left."

"Oh, Hekima," said King Vurugu, softly stroking her cheek with a dirty wing. "You must know by now that you can't have everything you want. You want a family? Love and affection? A place to call your own?" His gaze hardened. "And what about what *I* want? I want a loving mate... and to rule this entire jungle with fear-inspiring terror. You're going to help me get what I want... tonight."

Hekima trembled, unable to do anything but accept the facts. Soon she would be King Vurugu's mate, and her whole life would be at its end.

"He's just as sick as I remember him," Tajiri said, wincing in disgust at the sight of King Vurugu. "Those talons have gotten yellower, I swear."

Maalum, Kipanya and Tajiri had infiltrated Vurugu's kingdom with a surprising amount of ease. There was no one guarding the area at all; it was almost as if the animals were all preoccupied with some other matter of great importance. The three had arrived at the palace within hours, and were now perched on the rocky roof of the structure, peering through a small hole that enabled them to see inside.

The sight that greeted them was unattractive, to say the least.

"Let me at him!" Kipanya growled, leaping at the opening, only to be held back by Maalum, who was trying very, very hard in that moment to control his own anger.

"Wait," Maalum said, glaring at the monstrous eagle who was talking so horribly to his own mother. He looked even worse than he had imagined. "We have to plan this out."

"All right," Kipanya said. "Then read his thoughts already!"

"Keep your voice down," Tajiri warned. "He might hear us."

"Yeah, Tajiri," said Kipanya. "Shut your beak! He might hear us!"

"What? But I—"

"Shh!" Kipanya shook his head in disbelief at her.

Tajiri looked ready to explode, but she just about managed to prevent this by closing her eyes so she didn't have to look at the cub.

"I'm going to make sure she listens... if it's the last thing she does." Maalum had read King Vurugu's thoughts, and suffice to say they were pretty ghastly. "That has to be the most awful mind I've ever read..."

"Why?" Kipanya asked.

"I think it's pretty obvious that his mind is filled with nothing but putrid thoughts," Tajiri said, her tone laced with hatred for

the eagle. "After all, he did murder my parents in cold blood."

"He wants to marry my mother... and he has an unhealthy obsession with his feet," Maalum explained. "Very unhealthy, actually."

"Well, you have to be a professional to make your talons *yellow*," Tajiri said. "There are some dirty animals out there."

"When's he gonna marry your mom?" Kipanya asked.

"Tonight," Maalum said. He stared down at King Vurugu, who was still talking to Hekima. "We have to stop him."

"Okay," Kipanya said. "You hold him down, and I'll go for the throat."

"No," Maalum said. "We should—"

Maalum didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, since the roof – which was pretty weak – gave way and the three animals ended up tumbling through into the palace below. They landed in a heap of rubble and dust, grunting in discomfort.

"It's okay," Kipanya said. "The giant golden eagle broke my fall." He glanced up at the damaged ceiling. "They sure don't make 'em like they used to..."

It didn't take very long at all for King Vurugu to notice the three intruders that had invaded his palace. He folded his wings and narrowed his eyes at them. "Oh, look – three new intruders who I will crush underneath my toenails... after they've clipped them, of course."

Hekima's beak dropped open in disbelief when she spotted her son climbing to his feet, brushing dust from his chest.

"Maalum!" she cried. "Is... is that you?"

"Mom!" Without a moment's hesitation, the great golden eagle moved swiftly towards his mother and enveloped her in an

enormous hug. "I thought I'd never see you again..."

Tears of joy streamed down Hekima's face. She had thought the same thing. "Look at you," she said, impressed by his size. "You've grown so big now."

"I'm so glad you're all right," Maalum told her.

"How touching," remarked King Vurugu with a sneer. "I see the family decided to drop by for the wedding."

Maalum stared down at King Vurugu, who was slightly bigger than most golden eagles. This didn't faze him, however.

"You took my mother from me," he said angrily. "How could you be so horrible?"

"Boy, Hekima really overfed you, didn't she?" said King Vurugu, equally unafraid of the giant golden eagle. "You're a big kid."

"Stay away from him, Vurugu," spat Tajiri, joining Maalum by his side.

King Vurugu's eyes suddenly lit up at the sight of the much younger female. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, smiling, as she immediately caught his interest. "Who is *this*? A female like you really knows how to get me up and flying!"

"What?" Tajiri was thrown by the sudden show of affection.

King Vurugu glanced at Hekima, only to push her away roughly and move towards Tajiri instead. "You know, I was always thinking that there was something not quite right about me and you, Hekima," he said. "I think it's about time that I sorted things out and got myself a *new* girl."

"Get away from her," Maalum threatened. He wasn't a violent animal, but if anything was going to provoke him, then it was someone hurting Tajiri. "If you lay one talon on her, I'll—"

"Hurt her?" interrupted King Vurugu. "Oh, I would do no such thing." He grabbed Tajiri roughly, pulling her to his side. "I'm

going to treat this eagle with the tender love and respect that she deserves." He gazed into her eyes. "Good thing I've got a wedding planned for tonight. The quicker it gets done, the sooner we can get down to business..."

Tajiri let out a disgusted cry, trying to pull away from the horrible eagle. He had a very tight grip, however. "Maalum! Just crush this monster so we can get out of here!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said King Vurugu. "I killed your father, kid. It wouldn't take much effort for me to rip out your fat throat and do the same."

"I don't think so, sausage!" cried a voice from behind.

King Vurugu whipped round to see Kipanya leaping at him, claws outstretched and ready for the kill. The eagle merely scowled, picking up a rock with ease and hurling it at the cub. It struck him in the head, knocking him out instantly.

"Is this *seriously* your attempt at fighting me?" King Vurugu asked Maalum. "I'm honestly wondering how you ever thought you had a chance of halting my perfect marriage to Hekima— I mean, *this* lovely creature." He directed another meaningful glance at Tajiri.

"Her name is Tajiri," Maalum said, staring concernedly at Kipanya's unconscious body. "Now let her go."

"I will do no such thing," King Vurugu said. "This is my new beautiful bride – and I think I like her a lot better than Hekima. Tell me, my dear: have you ever clipped a male's toenails with your beak?"

Maalum growled, making an attempt to lunge at King Vurugu and finally put his frightening talons to good use.

However, it seemed that the ground wasn't very good at holding his weight up as the roof was, and Maalum screeched in surprise as it crumbled underneath his feet. A large rock bashed him on the head, knocking him out cold as he tumbled away

into the darkness below, unable to save himself.

"*Maalum!*" Hekima cried, watching as her son disappeared into the dismal depths.

King Vurugu affected a look of mock sympathy. "Ooh – that looked like a nasty fall," he commented. "Don't think he'll be coming back from that one."

Hekima sank to her knees at the edge of the hole in the ground, devastated that she had lost her son just after being reunited with him. No tears fell from her eyes. She had finally run out of them, it seemed. All she could do was look on.

King Vurugu shrugged. "Oh, well," he said. "Can't be helped. You might as well cut your own throat open, Hekima. I have no use for you anymore." He looked to Tajiri. "Now, let us fly, my dear. We have a wedding to attend to."

The evil eagle took hold of Tajiri with his yellow talons and flew from the palace, leaving Hekima watching helplessly as she screamed into the approaching night.

AN: That was a pretty twisty twist, wasn't it? Now King Vurugu is going to marry *Tajiri* instead of Hekima. He enjoys younger prey, I suppose. Still, Kipanya has been knocked out cold and Maalum has fallen to his doom, leaving Hekima heartbroken. Can anything possibly stop that disgusting creature? Looks like we're in trouble...

AN: King Vurugu's wedding is nigh, and it looks as though he is finally going to succeed in his awful plan. But will he?

Chapter Twenty: A Woeful Wedding

Amidst the darkness and the rubbles deep underneath King Vurugu's ugly palace, the great golden eagle lay there, totally unconscious. Dishevelled and humiliated, his feathers were streaked with dust and dirt, a poignant reminder of the defeat that he had suffered at the yellow talons of the evil king.

Maalum couldn't have looked more pathetic in those few moments. He was truly, utterly doomed.

And then his eyes snapped open.

His vision was misty at first, and the great golden eagle pondered on whether a faint mist had crept into the bowels of the cave which King Vurugu called home. Then he realised that it was just an unpleasant amount of dust floating around in the air, most likely caused by the impact of his sudden descent.

Maalum sat up, looking all around for a glimmer of hope – but all he could see was darkness and rocks. No signs of an exit whatsoever – something which he was hoping for – much to his dismay. It was as if King Vurugu had suddenly thrust him into some kind of prison cell. Maalum imagined that he probably did have some prison cells around here somewhere in this awful fortress of his; after all, his mother had been kept prisoner for a number of weeks, forced to do... well, Maalum couldn't even begin to imagine the troubles she had endured while under his "care".

No... he thought, as all the memories came flooding back into his head. His mother... King Vurugu... Tajiri...

"No!"

He yelled it this time, a shrill screech that reverberated around the place, dislodging a few tiny pieces of rubble from the rough walls of the cave. The great golden eagle kicked a rock in anger, sending it skidding across the sharp surface of the ground. At long last, his anger had provoked him into committing a violent act – even if it was only against an inanimate object.

Maalum had finally reached his boiling point, terrified at the prospect of King Vurugu marrying the animal who he loved the most. It was bad enough that his mother had been kidnapped and tortured by a psychopath who had some sort of sick interest in his feet, but now Tajiri was being forced to become his mate. And he couldn't do anything about it. It was simply

more than he could bear.

"No, no, no," Maalum muttered, pulling himself to his feet. He threw his enormous weight against the wall, hoping that he could somehow break through to freedom – but all he did was get a mouthful of dust in return.

The great golden eagle coughed and spluttered, irritated by the awful taste in his mouth, only to remind himself that his mother had probably endured far worse over the past few weeks. Being forced to put a disgusting eagle's filthy yellow talons in her mouth, for one thing. But he didn't know that yet, of course.

"Come on, come on..." Maalum racked his brain for a solution, somewhat regretful that he hadn't spent all that much time in school. But he had grown up considerably since then, and he was still pretty intelligent. Not to mention that he had psychic powers.

Wait a minute... The great golden eagle almost slapped himself across the face at how stupid he'd been. Of course! He was psychic. Surely that would enable him to get out of here? *If you ever needed a reason to use these powers, then you have one right now.*

Closing his eyes and attempting to remain calm, Maalum focused his powers and tried to read someone's mind. Anyone's. There had to be someone around nearby, unless he had somehow fallen hundreds of feet below the ground. He discarded the possibility, however, since he knew that he would be instantly dead if that were the case – and so far, he hadn't broken a single bone in his body. Slight bruising, yes, but he was more than capable of walking and flying.

Maalum struggled and strained his brain, hoping that he would pick up on a fleeting thought from someone who lived in King Vurugu's kingdom. It would give him a clue as to how far underground he was, and whether he stood a chance of getting back to the surface again.

Sadly, there was nothing.

Sighing in despair, the great golden eagle sank to his knees and gave up. No thoughts whatsoever were pouring through his head, when normally it had worked without fail before. Now, however, his head felt as empty as... well, the pit where he was trapped. It broke his heart to think of what King Vurugu could possibly be doing to Tajiri right now.

No – don't think about it, Maalum told himself, shaking his head. Focus on escaping.

Maalum glanced upwards at the ceiling, wondering on whether he would be able to fly up and somehow crash through with his weight. He was the biggest of golden eagles, after all, so maybe it wouldn't be too hard. He knew he was being a bit overly optimistic, but when trapped in such an unfortunate situation, it was much more preferable to crying and moaning in depression.

Okay... let's do this, the great golden eagle thought, before spreading his grand wings and flying straight up into the ceiling.

Thwack!

Maalum fell flat onto his back, crying and moaning in depression. Clearly, that hadn't been the best idea. The ceiling must have caved in on itself after the initial fall, and the only way he would be able to break through was from the other side.

In contrast to his dismal status, however, it seemed that luck was finally on his side.

Crash!

A thin beam of light shone down from above on Maalum's chest, having been created by a sudden opening that had appeared in the ceiling. Confused at first, the great golden eagle narrowed his eyes to see what – or who – had been the cause of this. Hopefully, it wasn't King Vurugu coming to kill him. *Then* it wouldn't be so lucky.

"Hey – you down there, sausage?"

Maalum raised an eyebrow. "Kipanya?" he said. "Is that you?"

"Well, it ain't a girly little lioness with long nails," Kipanya replied, pulling aside more rocks from the ceiling, revealing his face.

"I thought King Vurugu... well..." Maalum didn't really want to say it. "You know... He—"

"Finished me off?" Kipanya suggested. "Snuffed me out? Killed me? Murdered me? Slaughtered me? Slit my throat? Broke my legs? Tore my skull out? Bent my neck into a—"

"Yeah, pretty much," Maalum interrupted, getting to his feet. "I'm so glad you're alive, though. We have to stop King Vurugu before he marries Tajiri!"

"Your mother told me about it," Kipanya replied, reaching out with a paw to pull Maalum up, only to feel foolish for doing so moments later when he used his wings to fly out of the small cave. "That sausage carried her off."

"My mom?" said Maalum. "She's okay, too?"

"Well... as okay as a kidnapped victim can be," Kipanya said. "She's all the way up there."

The cub pointed with a claw up above to a tiny little circle of light. It was hard to make out, but Maalum could see the faint outline of an eagle looking down on them. It had to be Hekima; he knew right away.

"How on earth did you get up here?" Maalum asked, astounded at how much skill Kipanya had displayed in his attempt to rescue him.

"I climbed," Kipanya said, gesturing to the platform-like rock structures that made up the walls of the cave; it looked like climbing a mountain. "Told ya I was the best, most adventurous cub who ever lived."

"I've never been so happy to see you brag," Maalum confessed, staring up at the path to safety. "Come on. I'll carry you."

"Why, where are we going?" Kipanya asked. "Home, right?"

"No," said Maalum. "We're rescuing Tajiri."

"Tajiri?" exclaimed Kipanya. "That sausage? I think you'd better face facts, kid. She's a goner."

"No!" Maalum snapped, anger burning inside of him once more. "I won't allow Vurugu to marry her. He's already tortured my mother. I won't let the same thing happen twice. You have to help me."

"How the heck am I supposed to help you?" asked Kipanya. "It's a wedding! What do you expect me to do, speak now or forever hold my peace?"

A smile crossed Maalum's beak. "Exactly."

Tajiri thought that she would have preferred to be anywhere but standing right next to Vurugu right now. Perhaps she could be drowning at the bottom of the ocean, or burning to ashes in the depths of a volcano. Anything as long as she didn't have to remain in the presence of this dreadful creature.

King Vurugu beamed at his wife-to-be, stood on a hilltop with her as they gazed down on the crowd below. All of the other animals of King Vurugu's land looked both miserable and bored out of their minds. However, they knew that they had to attend this woeful occasion, because King Vurugu had threatened the death penalty to anyone who refused. It felt like every order he made involved threatening the death penalty in some way...

A rather meek eagle was stood beside King Vurugu. The evil king had asked him to perform the wedding ceremony, and he didn't look all too pleased to engage in such a task for such a repulsive being. Still, he was under the threat of death, so he had no other choice.

"Females and males, we are gathered here today to celebrate the... uh, pleasant wedding of King Vurugu and his beloved bride, Hekima."

"Um, it's actually, uh... Tajiri," King Vurugu sharply reminded him. "Yeah. That's it. Forgot to change that in rehearsals..."

"I mean, Tajiri," said the unfortunate eagle, whose name was Kuhani.

Tajiri scoffed in disgust at the fact that King Vurugu couldn't even remember her name. It was quite clear that she was one thing and one thing only to this creature: an object. She dreaded to think what horrors awaited her after this miserable occasion. One look at his jagged yellow talons – which looked uglier than ever by now – reminded her of her parents' deaths, and served as an ominous warning as to what would happen to her if she stepped so much as a toe out of line during the wedding.

"This is now the seventh wedding of our esteemed King Vurugu," Kuhani continued. "Hopefully, it'll go a tad bit better than his previous relationships..."

Tajiri glanced at the crowd, noticing that they had obviously been through this kind of thing with their evil king several times before. In fact, upon listening closer, they could hear them muttering amongst themselves.

"He's ghastly," said a lioness.

"He's horrible," muttered a gopher.

"I think I dropped my staff," whispered a lion.

"And now I will allow the bride and groom to speak their respective wedding vows," said Kuhani, turning to King Vurugu and Tajiri.

"Actually, *I* will be the only one speaking the vows," said King Vurugu. "After all, the bride never has anything interesting to

say. It's all about the dashing groom – *me*." He chuckled in his usual cruel way, outright proving Tajiri's notion that he viewed her as an object, and nothing more.

What a freak, she thought.

King Vurugu grabbed the female golden eagle roughly with his yellow talons, gazing deep into her eyes, as if he actually loved her instead of viewing the same way one would a stick on the ground.

"Tajiri, do you promise to be my loving bride? Do you promise to cook, clean, massage my feet, clip my toenails and engage in passionate activities with me for the rest of your miserable life?" asked King Vurugu.

The entire crowd fell silent. This had clearly been a completely new wedding vow from King Vurugu, as it visibly shocked them.

"Well, that was a little bit rude," said an elephant.

"He could have said 'please'," added a monkey.

Tajiri stared blankly at the miserable eagle. "Do I have a choice?" she retorted.

King Vurugu's talons instantly closed around Tajiri's neck, causing the entire crowd to gasp in horror.

"He's strangling his wife!"

"He's a wife beater!"

"Wow – this is getting good!"

"You'd better rephrase your answer, my dearly beloved," snarled King Vurugu, "or that pretty little neck of yours is going to be turned into mush faster than you can say, 'Oops, I fell off my elephant.'"

"Oops, I fell off my elephant," said a mouse who had fallen from his elephant.

Tajiri choked out the words, "I do."

The crowd looked even more abhorred now.

"How horrible!"

"How evil!"

"I still can't find my wretched staff..."

King Vurugu smiled. "And so do I," he said.

"Thank goodness for that," said Kuhani under his breath. He cleared his throat and addressed the crowd; this was the part he had been dreading. It was a compulsory part of the official wedding ceremony, and – even though he had been through this six times before – it always made him nervous. "Now, if anyone here knows why this couple should not be married, speak now... or forever hold your peace."

There were a few moments of tense silence. Kuhani breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that no one was going to speak up.

"Well—"

"Stop this wedding!"

The entire crowd let out another loud gasp.

"This is shocking!"

"This is amazing!"

"This is incredible!"

"This is sure to give me severe psychological defects for months!"

"Did he say 'speak now or forever hold your cheese'?"

"Silence!" King Vurugu boomed, staring with venom at the crowd of animals. "Who dares to speak out against my beautiful marriage?"

Someone pushed through to the front of the crowd. "I do!"

And King Vurugu gaped in surprise.

AN: I know this was a rather dismal occasion, but I couldn't help but try to incorporate a lot of humour into this chapter. I'm actually very amused by how it turned out. Maybe I'm just being a bit psychopathic. You guys will let it slide this one time, though, won't you? It's either that or face King Vurugu's talons...

AN: Here it is, everyone. The climax you have all been waiting for! Who has interrupted King Vurugu's wedding? Are they sure to become the latest in a line of awful toenail clippers for this vile villain? Is all hope lost? The answers are here to behold.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Rescue

King Vurugu, Tajiri, and the crowd all stared in stunned silence at the animal that had interrupted the wedding.

Kipanya.

Even though King Vurugu looked as though he had been dealt one hundred smacks by a wet monkey's tail, Tajiri was the most surprised of all. In fact, she was so surprised that she thought everyone there was experiencing some kind of horrid hallucination, her included.

"The cub?" exclaimed King Vurugu, unable to comprehend why this smallish, rowdy lion cub had intervened in the ceremony. *Is he actually in love with her?* he pondered. This day just kept getting weirder and weirder..

"*Kipanya?*" yelled Tajiri, unable to understand why this tiny, brutish lion cub had halted the wedding proceedings. *Is he actually in love with me?* she wondered. This day just kept getting worse and worse...

"That's right!" proclaimed Kipanya, looking as proud as could be to declare his love for Tajiri. Although, if one looked into his eyes, they would be able to see instantly that this was highly

embarrassing and utterly degrading for the cub. "I am in love with Tajiri, and I demand that she marry me instead of King Vurugu!"

The crowd became both shocked and excited by this new arrival. He was certainly showing a lot of bravery to go toe to toe with King Vurugu – at his own wedding, no less! It was the best occasion they'd been to in years!

"This is quite a surprise!" a lion exclaimed.

"I'm utterly amazed!"

"I'm thoroughly astounded!"

"I'm happier than a sand mouse!"

"I'm positively elated!"

"Has anyone seen my staff?"

"You've gotta be tugging my talons here," King Vurugu said in disbelief, shaking his head at the cub. "Are you trying to tell me that you've travelled far and wide with that enormous golden eagle to save some little brat you've got a crush on?"

Retch... retch... retch... thought Kipanya, but he held back the urge to vomit and continued with his act. "Yes," he said. "I love Tajiri way more than you do. I think it's only fair that you hand her over to me."

So it's either marry the guy who thinks I'm a "little brat" or live out the rest of my life with Kipanya, thought Tajiri, mulling over the options here. *Is slitting my own throat a possibility by this point?*

"I think you'll find that she's far more devoted to me," proclaimed King Vurugu in an arrogant tone. "There are only so many females in the world that will bite my toenails and love every second of it. It's a special kind of love, I find."

Now I really want to throw up, Kipanya thought, imagining his

cheeks turning a sickly shade of green. *Someone kill me...*

"That's where you're wrong, ya sausage!" Kipanya said, feeling slightly more confident now that he was inserting some of his own vocabulary into the argument. "*True* love, is, uh... um... biting the *female's* toenails! Yeah!"

The crowd gasped.

"I never thought of that!"

"It's so romantic!"

"We've had the wrong idea for years!"

"Do claws even technically count as toenails?"

"But I've lost both my feet in a bizarre coconut accident!"

"That's okay, dear – I love you the way you are."

"Well, thank you—"

"*Be quiet!*" boomed King Vurugu, having had more than enough of the crowd's pointless murmurings by now. "This is *my* wedding, *my* special day, *my* kingdom, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let any of you fools mess it up for a single second! Now, sit down, shut up, and if there are any more interruptions then I am going to scream very, very loudly!"

"*Wah!*"

Tajiri squealed as something – or *someone* – picked her up from behind, lifting her into the air. Looking around in surprise, she soon found that she was in the familiar grip of much gentler – and, thankfully, less yellow – talons.

"Maalum!"

The great golden eagle flashed his mate-to-be a mild smile as he carried her off into the air, causing her to smile back.

"You okay?" he asked.

Tajiri managed a nod. "I am now," she said, somewhat relieved by the knowledge that the whole "I love you" business with Kipanya was just a mere distraction in order for Maalum to rescue her. That cub having feelings for her was almost as bad as marrying King Vurugu...

Speaking of King Vurugu, the evil eagle was left jumping up and down in anger, screaming his lungs out.

"No! No! No! No! No!" King Vurugu looked livid. He stared at the crowd in desperation. "*He stole my bride!*"

"He stole his bride!"

"Serves him right!"

"Yeah – you suck, Vurugu!"

"Not only that! He sucks toenails!"

"*Yeah!*"

Giving in to mob psychology, the crowd started picking up rocks and stones, hurling them all at King Vurugu. He batted them away with his ugly wings, yelling out in discomfort.

"Stop it, you rats!" King Vurugu said as he was met with a barrage of more objects. "I am your king, and you will listen to — Hey, was that a tomato? *Why does everyone bring fruit to an event?*"

Kipanya joined in the assault on King Vurugu, hurling as many rocks as he could possibly find at him. "Take that, ya sausage!" he shouted, laughing with glee. He let out an eagle-like screech, grinning happily. "*I like it!*"

King Vurugu growled. He'd had enough of the inhabitants of his kingdom, and would make sure that they were dealt with accordingly – something which meant "kill them all in a most painful manner" – when his pest problem was concluded.

Letting out a screech of anger – one which sounded decidedly

different to Kipanya's more triumphant screech – King Vurugu spread his wings and took to the skies, heading in the direction of Maalum and Tajiri, who had vanished over the top of a cliff.

Noticing King Vurugu's speedy escape, the crowd groaned in disappointment.

"Aw, he's gone!"

"Is the wedding over?"

"Does that mean we all have to go home?"

"Hey – I found my staff!"

"Actually, that's my tail, sir."

Kipanya stared in the direction of where King Vurugu had fled, knowing that he was going after Maalum and Tajiri. Worry instantly settled deep into the pit of his stomach, since he knew that his best friend was a lover, not a fighter – and, with a maniac like King Vurugu, that was a very big problem indeed.

"We'd better find somewhere to hide," Maalum said, musing on how long it would be before King Vurugu decided to chase after them. They had more than a few minutes, at best. "King Vurugu will come after us, I'm sure."

"You'd better let me go, then," Tajiri said, still held in the safe, soft grip of Maalum's talons. "If we split up, he can only go after one of us. Maybe I can think of something that'll stop him for good."

"No," Maalum said. "I've already lost you once; he won't get those ugly talons of his on you again."

"I seriously doubt you're in a position to fight him," Tajiri replied, more than used to Maalum's pacifistic tendencies by now. Not that it was a problem with her; she loved him, and if he decided that he was going to be a non-violent eagle, then fair enough. Let him make his own choices in life. "So why don't

you leave it to me?"

"Because he might... kill you," Maalum said. King Vurugu had already kidnapped his mother and held her prisoner for weeks on end, resulting in her spirit being severely weakened. "And I can't take that risk. If he's going to kill someone, then it's going to be me."

"We're both in this, Maalum," Tajiri reminded him, now struggling against his grip. "If we die, then we die together. Right?"

"No!" Maalum snapped, desperate to try and get through to her. Things didn't have to be this way. All she had to do was listen, and maybe she stood a chance of surviving, even if *he* didn't. "I won't let him touch you!"

"Well, you're going to fail, then," said a voice from behind.

Thwack!

Maalum grunted as he felt a pair of slimy, jagged talons slicing through his back. He groaned in pain, causing his grip on Tajiri to loosen. Taken by surprise, the female golden eagle dropped like a boulder to the ground below, landing in a thick bush before she could save herself by flying.

King Vurugu smiled as his attack on Maalum worked; the great golden eagle had been significantly weakened by the blow. It wouldn't take too much for him to deliver the final strike and end his pitiful life of rejection once and for all.

Maalum swooped round to face King Vurugu, hopeful that, maybe if he wasn't willing to fight back, he could at least convince the evil villain to just kill him and let Tajiri go. He hadn't exactly been expecting to come out of this alive. It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was all he had.

"Don't bother trying to fight back," King Vurugu warned. "I killed your father, and I can kill you, too."

"I won't fight you," Maalum said. "But if you kill me, you have to promise that you'll let Tajiri go."

"And why would I do that?" said King Vurugu, smiling unpleasantly. "I could have both her *and* your mother to be my obedient servants. It's almost more beauty than I can bear. Once you're out of the picture, there won't be anyone to stop me."

"You wouldn't dare," said Maalum, frowning, "or I'll..."

King Vurugu's smile seemed to widen. "Or you'll *what?*"

Maalum was stuck for words by this point. The simple truth of the matter was that there was nothing he could say to prevent King Vurugu from killing him and taking Tajiri and Hekima prisoner for ever. The only way he stood a chance of stopping him was to fight him... but he couldn't possibly do that. It just wasn't in his nature.

King Vurugu's thoughts filtered into his mind. "*Pathetic... He's weak, and he knows it.*"

"Exactly," said King Vurugu, seizing an air of victory. "You may be big, but on the inside, you are nothing. You're not brave, you're not powerful, and you're not strong. It's animals like me who have the glory, because we know how to take control of the weak. And you, Maalum, are most certainly weak. You might as well give up now. At least then you'll save yourself the embarrassment."

Maalum felt tinier than an ant as King Vurugu insulted him. Every word he spoke was like a knife through his heart. There was an element of truth to it, though. He was weak unless he took control... like a predator.

"*But you're huge, kid! I mean, one look at you and animals will run for cover!*"

"*Maalum, lions may be more feared than us, but you will always have the advantage of size.*"

"Your size makes you unique, Maalum."

The words of his friends and family rang in his head, reminding him of how his size wasn't a hindrance, but a gift. Something that would grant him bravery, power, and strength. Everything that he needed to overcome his foes.

"On second thoughts, I don't really need either of those females," taunted King Vurugu. "I think I'll just kill 'em both. There are plenty of other toenail clippers in the sea."

In that moment, Maalum abandoned all of his principles. A red mist descended as his mind was clouded with hatred for King Vurugu. He wanted to hurt him... *kill* him... Maalum would make sure that the evil eagle was sorry for all the pain that he had caused.

"Time to die, kid," said King Vurugu, and he lunged at Maalum with his talons.

The great golden eagle dodged the blow with ease, using his wings to bat King Vurugu away into the trunk of a nearby tree. The evil eagle was stunned by the force of the blow; he hadn't expected Maalum to show this much strength.

But he wasn't dealing with Maalum anymore. This was a fully fledged predator.

Screeching with triumph, Maalum dived towards King Vurugu, digging his talons into the villain's stomach and cutting through his skin, drawing blood. He sensed the smell, and he liked it.

"What do you think you're doing?" cried King Vurugu, grunting sharply as a fresh burst of pain shot through his body. Maalum said nothing, continuing to force his talons through the king's skin, widening the wound and inciting more agony.

The great golden eagle finally let go, but not before throwing King Vurugu headfirst into the ground below, giving him no time to react as he smashed into the bottom of the tree. He barely had a few seconds to pull himself to his feet before Maalum was

on him again, hacking and slashing, showing no signs of stopping.

Maalum took pleasure in King Vurugu's pain, happy to see that he was on top for once. Animals had ridiculed him for too long, and it was about time that he showed them who the true king of the jungle was. Never mind lions. He was a golden eagle. The biggest of them all. The ultimate predator.

By the end of his vicious and brutal attack on King Vurugu, the evil eagle looked a pathetic sight. He collapsed against the trunk of the tree, battered and bruised, blood dribbling from the multitude of cuts that littered his body. His talons were now an ugly mixture of yellow and red, a threat no more. He was finished.

Panting with rage, Maalum looked down on the eagle with a malevolent grin, pleased to see that King Vurugu would no longer be causing any more problems for him. The king had been demeaned and disgraced. It was what he deserved.

"You gonna kill me?" said King Vurugu, looking weak and frail. Maalum had already noticed the fatal wound on his stomach; it was bleeding profusely. He didn't have long left anyway. "Just do it."

Maalum obliged, slicing through King Vurugu's throat with ease. His head tipped back, crimson blood spouting from the gash like a waterfall. He let out a few final gasps, and then fell silent.

He was gone for good.

The following screech that filled the jungle served as a signal that Maalum had finally defeated the evil king, achieving the revenge that he deserved. His mother and Tajiri were safe at last. They would surely be proud of him.

"Maalum?"

The great golden eagle turned around, still smiling. His eyes fell upon Tajiri, who was looking up at him with a frightened

expression, hidden behind a bush.

She had seen everything.

The happy – almost psychotic – grin that was etched across Maalum's beak soon faded away, to be replaced by one of horror and self-disgust. In just a matter of minutes, he had changed from a pure soul into a barbaric murderer, the likes of which the animal kingdom had never laid eyes on before. As he stared into the eyes of the eagle he had loved so much, unable to do anything else, he realised that Tajiri didn't quite know what to make of him anymore. She was... scared of him.

And he was scared of himself.

AN: I suppose you were expecting a happy ending for this chapter, weren't you? Not so. King Vurugu has at last been vanquished, but Maalum murdered him in cold blood. And Tajiri saw everything. That was rather chilling, wasn't it? Ooh... consequences, consequences. Now it's getting dark...

AN: It's been a very long and emotional journey, but I am pleased to say that I am thoroughly pleased with the final chapter of this story. I feel that it will leave a good impression on you. So, without further ado, please enjoy the last chapter of *The Hermit*.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Soul Searching

Maalum didn't know what to say. At a total loss for words, the great golden eagle could only stare at Tajiri – transfixed by her sad, frightened eyes – while memories of the past few minutes raced around in his head. There was King Vurugu... insulting him... taunting him... pushing him... until he did the unthinkable. He couldn't control himself. It was as if instincts had taken over and done the job for him. He had become a predator – just like his father before him – and conquered his prey. Although he had no intention of eating King Vurugu either dead or alive.

"Tajiri... I..." Maalum began, knowing there was nothing he could say that could excuse his actions. He thought that he had levelled with Tajiri on everything; there was very little that she didn't know about him. And now this... The eagle he loved had witnessed his cold-blooded act of murder, and she looked terrified by him. It broke his heart – and, to some extent, his mind – to see it with his own eyes. "I... I..."

It was no use. Maalum's voice caught in his throat, as tears began to stream down his cheeks. Tears of shame. He had set some very key principles for himself before, the main one being that he was a pacifist. He didn't fight. He wished to be peaceful. However, he had allowed King Vurugu to break him, thus ensuring that he was no longer a pure soul. The great golden eagle was a vengeful, angry creature, hell-bent on destroying all who opposed him. If it took very little to provoke him into claiming King Vurugu's life, then it scared Maalum to imagine what else he was capable of...

Maalum stopped trying to speak to his mate-to-be, staring down at the ground and wishing that he would disappear for ever – or just drop dead right there. He avoided Tajiri's gaze, sickened by the knowledge that she probably thought he was a monster right now. The regret he felt was unbearable.

Much to his surprise, though, her soft voice flooded into his brain.

"You poor thing."

Three words. And then nothing. It seemed that Maalum's powers of mind reading were weak when he was under such emotional strain. But Tajiri's small thought – that very brief sentence – sounded clear as crystal in his head. The message had been received and understood.

She felt sorry for him.

Lifting his head up – only seconds later realising that he had covered it with his wing, as if to hide himself from the guilt that

he felt – he looked at Tajiri, who had developed a rather saddened expression of her own. Her attention was focused solely on him, as if nothing else mattered. She hadn't even spared a glance for King Vurugu's dead body; it wasn't as though she wished to look at him ever again. All she seemed to care about was Maalum.

"Maalum?" Tajiri called, trying to gain some sort of response from him. She took a step forward, staring up at the great golden eagle, her eyes connecting with his. "Listen... I know you feel like—"

"Stay away from me," Maalum said, speaking a full sentence for the first time since he had attempted to barter with King Vurugu for Tajiri's safety earlier. "I'm a monster."

He spoke the truth. Well, the truth that he had conjured up for himself. That was what he believed he was. A monster. Someone who cared only for his own safety and no one else's. His soul had become corrupted by revenge – for both his mother and Tajiri – resulting in the murderous destruction that had followed. Now he truly *was* the predator, and he always would be.

"You're not a monster," Tajiri said, shaking her head. "I saw what happened. With Vurugu and..."

Maalum flinched. He found himself amazed by how profoundly memories could hurt.

"Look... what's done is done," Tajiri said, placing a wing against his chest. "You did what you had to do."

Maalum looked down at his feet again, comparing once more the difference in size between his and Tajiri's. His titanic talons with her tiny toes. He wondered what would happen if Tajiri managed to make him angry one day. Maybe his mother's little crack about him being able to crush someone with his pinky toe would finally come to fruition...

"I did what I had to do?" Maalum repeated, a fire suddenly

burning inside his heart. He felt an urge to get everything off his chest. Tajiri had to know – she deserved to – that he was a dangerous killer. "*I did what I had to do?* No, I didn't. I killed him, Tajiri. No... I *slaughtered* him... and I liked it."

Maalum's expression looked even more heartbroken upon uttering those last few words. He had taken pleasure in his disposing of King Vurugu, even enjoying the scent of his blood. The great golden had been all too happy to slice his throat and send his soul into wherever such horrible creatures went when they died. Perhaps, one day, he would end up joining them...

"Think about it," Maalum told her. "If Vurugu can make me do that to him, then what's stopping anyone else from doing it? I am the biggest threat in this jungle. What if *you* make me mad, and then..." He turned away from her, disgusted with himself. "I don't deserve to be with you. I'm dangerous. You'd better go... before I hurt you, too."

Tajiri didn't listen to him. "Maalum," she said, "you lost control. It happens. Sometimes... sometimes we can't help ourselves, and we lash out. I mean, he kidnapped your mother... *tortured* her... and then he tried to marry *me*! King Vurugu has caused nothing but pain and suffering. He killed my parents. No one like that deserves to live."

"That's not for me to decide," Maalum said, leaning against the trunk of a tree. He could still see King Vurugu's corpse, spattered with blood, in his mind's eye. "I could have just taken you and my mother and left. We wouldn't have had to deal with him ever again."

"You know it wouldn't have worked out that way," Tajiri said. "He would have come after you. Found us. Like he did when he murdered your father. He had to die sooner or later."

"I tried my best to be peaceful," Maalum said. "I didn't want to hurt anyone, let alone *kill* them. And now look at me... You know exactly what I'm capable of, and I can't allow it to happen again."

"It *won't* happen again," Tajiri assured him. "We can go away... far away... and no one will ever bother us again. We can be together. Like we promised."

"You don't know that," said Maalum. "As much as I love you, Tajiri – as much as I care about you – it's best that we never see each other again. I'm sorry."

Maalum started to walk away from Tajiri, ignoring her shouting his name. He was doing what had to be done, as she had put it earlier. He wanted Tajiri to be safe, and she would be. She would find someone else to love and have a family with. She would forget all about him. It was his punishment. He was no mate. He could never be.

"Maalum!" Tajiri cried, sounding desperate for him not to leave her. "*Maalum!*"

"Maalum," said a new voice.

The great golden eagle turned around, and was met with the confused stare of Hekima, his mother, looking down on him from her position on a high branch. "What do you think you're doing?"

Maalum's beak quivered at the sight of her. More tears leaked from his eyes, as he struggled to leave the situation behind and flee to wherever a freak like him could hide. He couldn't stay. He was too deadly. Tajiri, Hekima, Kipanya... they were all at risk as long as he was there.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said, holding back a sob. "I'm a killer."

"I know, dear," Hekima said, fluttering down from the branch and landing in front of her son. "And, sadly, nothing can change that."

"Yeah," Maalum agreed, nodding. "Nothing."

"I should have paid more attention to you," Hekima said regretfully. "I knew that you were a peaceful soul... I just never

took the time to praise you for it."

Maalum wiped tears from his eyes. "Huh? What?"

"There's never been anyone quite like you, Maalum," Hekima told him. "You're the biggest creature this jungle has ever seen, and I very much doubt that there will ever be another one ever again. You're special in more ways than I can imagine. An animal like you could be murdering others left, right and centre – but you chose not to."

"But you know what I did," sobbed Maalum. "I killed him."

"Only to save the ones you loved," Hekima said, looking at Tajiri, who had joined her by her side. "I mean, look at your own mother. I haven't washed in weeks, my breath tastes like toenails, and I've endured more suffering than anyone should ever experience in *ten* lifetimes. But you rescued me, Maalum. I'm alive, and I have you to thank for that. I'm proud of you, son." She stared into his eyes. "I feel honoured to call myself your mother."

Maalum considered his mother's words. She had never spoken to him in this way before. He didn't realise how strongly she felt for her son. Despite his flaws, despite his mistakes... she still adored him for who he was. Even if he was a pacifist. It didn't matter to her.

It was then that Maalum realised that he had the best mother in the world.

"Thank you, Mom," Maalum said with a smile. "I love you."

The great golden eagle enveloped his mother in a hug, lifting her off the ground and causing her to laugh in response.

"Look at you," she smiled. "Too big to even hug."

"Sorry," he said, putting Hekima down. Maalum's thoughts soon turned to the future, and what might lie ahead for him. "I... I don't know what to do now..."

"Go," said Hekima.

Maalum stared with confusion into his mother's eyes. "What?"

"You heard me," Hekima said. "Go. You've grown up, Maalum. You don't need me to look after you anymore. It's time you lived your own life."

"But—"

"Not without a certain someone, of course," Hekima said with a smile, nudging Tajiri forward. "You have my blessing."

Tajiri stood beside Maalum, who gently placed a wing on her shoulder.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Can we be together?"

"It's your choice," said Maalum, their gazes meeting. "I don't know where I'm going..."

"We'll figure it out," said Tajiri. "*Together.*"

"I love you," Maalum said, starting to think that maybe their relationship could continue after all.

"I love you, too," said Tajiri.

Maalum nuzzled the top of her Tajiri's, before looking at his mother. "I'll visit you," he promised her.

"Of course you will," Hekima said with a smile. "You think I'm going to let you leave your mother all on her own?"

"Thanks, Mom," Maalum said from the bottom of his heart. "For everything."

"I'll always be here to help you, son," Hekima said, her smile widening. "A bit of wisdom goes a long way. After all, that's what my name means. 'Wisdom'."

Hekima... thought Maalum, having been given a renewed sense of appreciation for the name. He realised that it represented a lot of things for him, and would serve as an inspiration that

would guide him throughout his life.

And, as Maalum and Tajiri, the two golden eagles, flew off into the sunset – their souls entwined – he promised himself that it was a name he would always honour.

Three Years Later...

Maalum – a name that he hadn't called himself in a long time – was quite older now. Still just as big – some would say even bigger now – the great golden eagle took in a deep breath and regarded the dazzling beauty of the enormous sea below him.

This was his new home now. He and Tajiri had moved out here after leaving the kingdom of the former King Vurugu – which now was in the possession of some eagles who ran a popular pedicure service – where they knew that they would be able to live their lives in peace, without fear of being bothered by anyone. That was just the way Maalum liked it.

He hadn't seen Kipanya ever since they had plotted to distract King Vurugu all those years ago. He did attempt to try and find him a couple of times, but the cub had become like the wind. Knowing Kipanya's hunting skills, Maalum was sure that he had learned the art of staying hidden and out of sight. He was a sneaky one, that guy...

Sadly, as happy as their years of marriage had been, tragedy had eventually worked its way once more into Maalum's life. Tajiri had contracted quite a rare and, unfortunately, lethal illness. As hard as he tried, Maalum was unable to save her, and Tajiri eventually died in her sleep, locked in his loving embrace.

Stricken by grief, Maalum became a recluse, seldom leaving his home with only himself for company. After a while, he even stopped referring to himself by his own name. It felt dirty and fraught with bad memories. Considering what he had done in the past, it was somewhat relieving to assume a new identity.

The only thing he had left in his life was his mother. Hekima,

thankfully, was still very much alive, and Maalum made sure that he visited her once every week. She was a bit older by now, but very healthy – a lucky thing, considering what she had been through with King Vurugu – and it didn't seem like she would be leaving him anytime soon. He was happy for that, at least.

Still, the death of his mate had taken away a good portion of Maalum's heart. He didn't want to speak or interact with anyone else, instead preferring to spend his days reading the minds of others from afar and admiring the scenery of his beautiful – if somewhat lonely – home.

The great golden eagle watched the setting sun create sparkles of rippling light across the waters, and considered what the future held for him. Nothing was certain. He knew that, of course. Anything could happen, from him being murdered or three strange intruders looking for his aid... The future was a mysterious thing.

I'll be ready, Maalum promised himself, sunlight reflecting off his orange eyes. *For anything*.

As the great golden eagle spread his mighty wings and took off into the sky, screeching out at the world, there was only one thing in his mind that he knew was certain.

Maalum was no more.

But the Hermit of Hekima had been born.

The End

AN: There you have it. We now know the full story of how Maalum, the giant golden eagle, became the Hermit of Hekima. A rather poignant ending, I must admit, but I suppose you could call it bittersweet. Sadly, that is the way the story goes.

I really hoped you enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed writing it, and I look forward to your concluding reviews.

They're always a treat to read after finishing a big story such as this one. Goodbye for now, and thank you very much for reading *The Hermit*.

—ThatPersonYouMightKnow